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THE CURATE'S HOME BY AGNES GIBERNE.

IN ONE VOLUME.

"With silent fortitude
Suffering, yet hoping all things."—HEMANS.

THE

CURATE'S HOME.

BY

AGNES GIBERNE.

LEIPZIG
BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ
1882

TO THE

BELOVED MEMORY OF HELEN,

THESE PAGES

ARE AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED,

BY THE AUTHOR.

PREFACE

TO THE SECOND (LONDON) EDITION.

THE question has been frequently asked me, whether the picture contained in the following pages is one of pure fancy, or whether it is copied in any degree from real life. On the publication of a second edition, I feel bound to give a plain answer to this question. The picture is no mere fancy sketch. The privations, great and small, endured by the Lyster family, are matters not of imagination, but of simple fact.

Instances might be multiplied in support of this assertion. This, however, I feel to be unnecessary. Particulars may be easily obtained by those who desire to know more. I would merely mention that, from well-established statistics, it is found that there are no less than five thousand curates, in the Church of England and Wales, with incomes under eighty pounds per annum; and five thousand beneficed clergymen, with incomes under one hundred and fifty pounds per

annum. In a large proportion of these cases, there is little or no private property.

Few, after this, will assert that the picture is an impossible or an exaggerated one. I can only say that it might, with perfect truth, have been drawn in far darker and more gloomy colours.

THE CURATE'S HOME.

CHAPTER I.

"Seam and gusset and band,
Band and gusset and seam."
T. HOOD.

"Oh, 'tis hard, 'tis hard to be working,
The whole of the live-long day."
MANCHESTER SONG.

"ELSIE, will you pass me the black cotton? Mamma, I think the basket has scarcely ever before been so full as it is this week."

The speaker was a pretty girl of about eighteen. It was a hot July day, and the rays of the sun beat warmly in upon the parlour of the Rev. Frederick Lyster's house. The room was a very small one, and shabbily furnished. The worn faded carpet barely sufficed to cover the floor, and was mended and patched in every direction. The chairs were of cane, and the cushioned seats were covered with a chintz which had once rejoiced in a bright rose-bud pattern; but all colour, beyond a faint pervading pinkish hue, varied here and there by a feeble tinge of green, had been long since washed out. The coarse dark wintry cur-

tains, which, notwithstanding the time of year, still kept their place at the window, were drawn aside, and carefully disposed so as best to conceal the unsightly darns with which they were garnished. There were no Venetians, and the thin white blinds formed a poor protection against the glare of the sun. This was the only sitting-room in the house, except a small study, with a window facing in the same direction. At the back, on the same floor, were the kitchen, a tiny bedroom for the servant, and a still tinier store-closet.

There were only three occupants of the parlour. The washed and faded cotton dresses of the two young girls and their mother matched well with the furniture, yet all three were perfect ladies in appearance and in manners. Silence had lasted a considerable time, broken only by the click of three busy needles, when the eldest girl made the above remark.

"It is very full," Mrs. Lyster replied, in a pleasant quiet voice. "I am sorry to keep you both so hard at work; but I am afraid I should not get through it all alone."

"And it is very likely, mamma, that Elsie and I would coolly take our pleasure, while you sat mending our clothes," said Netta laughing. "But did you ever see such a deplorable sock as this? What a boy Harold is for wearing out his things! I really think it is a pity he cannot be condemned to mend them sometimes himself."

"He does not mean to give trouble. And after all I don't wonder at the holes," added Mrs. Lyster. "The socks are so old that I think the washing wears them out even faster than Harold's rough usage."

"And mending only makes them worse," said Netta.

"The very act of drawing the cotton through seems to tear a fresh hole. As to that jacket of Bertie's, it is fit for nothing but the fire."

"Yes, if Bertie had another to take its place. I am afraid there is little hope of that at present. We must wear our clothes as long as they will hold together."

"And when they won't, we must *tack* them together," said Netta quaintly. "Mamma, it seems curious that the Fitzroys should have been at the Hall for nearly a week, and that we should have seen nothing of them."

"I did not expect to see anything of them, dear. Even when they lived here, nine or ten years ago, just after we came, we rarely met them. They are very kind people, but I believe they think a good deal of position and wealth. And now that they have only come on a flying visit of ten days or a fortnight, there is really no time for renewing our old slight acquaintance."

"Papa said he supposed he ought to call there this afternoon," remarked Netta. "But I did not mean that, when I spoke of not seeing them. I only thought it was curious that we had not met them anywhere out-of-doors. The weather has been bad, certainly. Sunday, of course, we did not see them—it was so wet, that scarcely any one could go to church. I think I should be glad of a little rain to-day, instead of this hot sun. Do you know, mamma, Robert says that all sorts of alterations are going on at the Laurels, and he believes the Marshalls will not move in until the middle of next week. When they do, the Fitzroys will leave Elburton again."

"Yes; I fancy they only came because Mr. Fitzroy wanted to see his sister enter her new home, with everything comfortable about her."

"I wonder the Fitzroys do not come oftener to the Hall, or live there regularly in the summer. It must be nine years since they were last in Elburton," Netta observed.

"Quite that. But you know Elburton does not agree with Mrs. Fitzroy's health, and I believe also that they both very much prefer London to the country."

"Well, there is no accounting for taste, mamma. Do you think we are likely to see anything of the Marshalls when they are settled? There are some children, are there not?"

"Mrs. Marshall has a daughter, I hear, and one or two sons, but I imagine they are all grown up. It is not likely that they will have much to do with us."

"After all, it will make very little difference," said Netta cheerfully. "We have no time to spare for running about to people's houses, and I dare say they will be much too grand for us. Elsie, how silent you are this afternoon."

Elsie looked up without speaking, and Mrs. Lyster, glancing towards her at the same instant, noticed the paleness of her cheeks, and the dark lines under her eyes.

"Is your head aching, Elsie?"

"It aches rather, mamma," was the answer, in a low dispirited tone, as Elsie bent again over her work.

"It is the heat of this room," remarked Netta. "We might almost as well sit in an oven at once. Elsie, you have a tiresome piece of patching there. Let me take it."

"It is nearly done now," Elsie answered. "I should not mind if I thought it would last, but all will have to be mended over again next week."

"Hardly worth the trouble, is it?" said Netta. "But you, see, Elsie, not being beggars by birth, we can't quite go about in tatters."

Elsie's lip quivered slightly, but she did not speak, and Mrs. Lyster interposed—

"Elsie, I would rather you should not work any longer just now."

"The mending isn't half done," said Elsie, despondingly. "It won't do for me to be idle, mamma."

"You shall help us by-and-by, when your head is better. Do you think it would make you feel worse if you took the children out for a walk? Then you can work in the evening."

"I would much rather work now, and have the evening——" Elsie began, and paused.

"Have it for reading? But I can't have you working and studying the whole day, without taking any fresh air, dear. I don't think you will find the heat too great for walking. This room is close, but there is a nice breeze out-of-doors."

"Myra and the boys are in the back field," said Netta; "and I fancy Blanche is in the study. There is a slight degree more shade there than here, and the heat made her giddy."

"Go, Elsie, dear," said Mrs. Lyster, as she still hesitated; "it is the best thing for you."

Elsie slowly rose and folded up her work, while Netta remarked—

"You might walk to the Rectory, if you like, or else pay a visit to the Miss Carringtons. Perhaps you

will meet the boys coming home from their ramble. They went in that direction."

"Blanche is to go, mamma?" said Elsie, inquiringly, as she paused at the door.

"If she feels strong enough," replied Mrs. Lyster; and Elsie went out into the passage.

The study was a smaller room than the parlour, but it possessed this single advantage over the latter, that a low tree grew near the window, and partially warded off the sun's beams. Upon the floor lay a little thin white child, about seven years old, her sweet fair features contracted with an expression of suffering, her large dark eyes fixed on the ceiling, and her beautiful long brown curls sweeping the dingy carpet.

Elsie sat down on the floor, and took one of the small hands.

"Come, Blanchie—Blanchie, are you dreaming?"

"No; I'm only tired," said the child, bringing her gaze from the ceiling to her sister's face, with a long-drawn sigh. "I'm *so* tired, Elsie."

Elsie drew the little head, with the glossy curls, upon her lap, and passed her hands caressingly over the pale face.

"I am going for a walk, Blanche, to take Myra, and Bertie and Harold, and Willie and Freddie. We shall go to the Miss Carringtons', perhaps, or to the Rectory. Wouldn't you like to come too?"

"I can't walk," answered the plaintive tones. "I wish you would hold me, Elsie. The floor is so hard, it makes me ache all over."

Elsie complied, saying, "If you will come with me to the Miss Carringtons', you will be able to lie down on their nice sofa while we are talking."

"It is so far," returned Blanche, nestling her face into her sister's shoulder. "I wish we had a sofa here; the chairs tire me so."

"I wish we had, too," said Elsie, with a sigh of deeper feeling than Blanche could comprehend. "But now, darling, what am I to do? Mamma wants us to go out."

"She won't make me go. It is so hot. My lips burn, Elsie, and I am so thirsty. Water does me no good. I wish I had something nice to drink—or some fruit."

"I wish you had, darling," repeated Elsie. "Perhaps you would like a little milk."

"There isn't any in the house. Phœbe came in some time ago, and I asked her, and she said the milk wouldn't come till just tea-time, and there isn't any left. I'll ask mamma, Elsie, if I need go out."

Slowly she raised herself, looking as if she had scarcely strength to stand, and left the room. Elsie remained seated on the floor, her head bent down, and her hands locked together, until Netta's clear musical voice was heard in the passage, and she came in, carrying her little sister in her arms.

"Mamma thinks Blanche had better stay in, as she feels so poorly. Blanche says she would rather lie here on the floor. I wish the sun did not shine so full into our bedrooms upstairs, or she might rest on one of the beds. But I will bring down one or two pillows to put under her."

Blanche's little white face brightened at the suggestion, and Netta ran lightly away, reappearing almost immediately.

"Will you arrange them for her, Elsie, while I call the children?" she said, and then hastened out to the back-door, where the house was divided by a tiny strip

of ground from a small field. Several children were playing about there, regardless of the heat. The eldest was a merry girl of about eleven. The rest were boys, —Ethelbert, aged nine; Harold, a year younger; and the twins, fine little fellows of about five. Netta had some difficulty in making herself heard through their shouts of laughter, but she at length succeeded.

"Myra, will you make haste and dress? Elsie is going to take you all out for a walk."

Myra stopped short with an exclamation of dismay.

"A walk! oh, how tiresome! I thought you were all safely settled for the afternoon over the old mending-basket."

"So we thought too, but Elsie has a headache, and mamma wants her to go out." It is much better for you all than romping about in this hot sun. Come, Willie and Freddie, I am going to dress you. Now let us see who will reach the house first,—one, two, three, and away!"

Off they started, Netta's fleet light foot winning the race. She laughed at the boys for being beaten, and then took the twins upstairs into the tiny closet-like room they shared with Harold. The remaining space over the parlour, passage, and study was occupied by two bedrooms—one for Netta and Myra, the other for Elsie and Blanche. At the back of the house were two more, slightly larger,—the smallest belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Lyster, while in the other Ethelbert slept with his three elder brothers.

Very small was the size of each,—very scanty the furniture. One double bed—two of them in the boys' room,—a low chest of drawers, which had also to do duty as dressing-table,—a washhand-stand, and one or

two rickety cane chairs,—were nearly all that the bedrooms respectively contained. On Elsie's chest of drawers lay her library,—a History of England, and another of France; a French, a German, and a Latin Grammar, with dictionaries of the two former languages; one volume of an Encyclopædia; a "Pilgrim's Progress;" a hymn-book, containing a miscellaneous collection; Newton's "Cardiphonia," and Bogatsky's "Golden Treasury." Elsie's books formed a large proportion of the whole house-library. In the study, the number of volumes was certainly not more than three or four times as great. Only one or two exceptions to this simplicity of furniture were to be found in the house. In Mr. and Mrs. Lyster's bed-room was a small but handsome wardrobe, and in the study a most convenient writing-table,—presents from Mrs. Lyster's father, whose death had taken place about two years previous to the commencement of the story.

But to return to Elsie. After arranging little Blanche upon the pillows, she went upstairs to dress. Before she was quite ready, Netta's bright face appeared in the doorway.

"Are you here, Elsie? That is right. A walk will do you good."

Elsie shook her head involuntarily, and Netta came up to her.

"You naughty child!" she said, half playfully, half seriously, "why *will* you worry yourself about things which cannot be helped?"

"If they could be helped, I suppose they would not worry me," was Elsie's reply.

Netta looked at her for a moment in silence,—then asked,—

"What is it now, dear, particularly?"

"I don't know. Everything. It is of no use to talk."

"Then, is it of any use to brood in secret?" asked Netta gently.

"I can't help it. I can't bear things as you do, Netta."

"Oh, yes, you can; only you are not well to-day, and that keeps you from feeling bright. You will be all right to-morrow."

"I don't know," repeated Elsie. "One day is as bad as another. It is the same thing over and over again,—work, and noise, and worry, and no time for anything that I like."

"It is very trying for you, dear."

"No more for me than for you,—or it ought not to be. Don't stay, Netta; mamma will have too much to do as it is."

"Then promise me to go to Miss Carrington. She will cheer you up."

"I'll see,—if it is not too far."

"I don't think you will find it so hot as you expect. And you must not be back until six, for you are not going to work any more before tea. Come downstairs now, dear. The children are all waiting."

Elsie obeyed, and a few minutes later was walking with her little troop through Ashgrove. Mr. Lyster's house stood upon a gentle slope, and the road led downwards to the village, which was a very small one. It consisted, indeed, of little more than a dozen cottages grouped closely together, and about the same number scattered about. The surrounding country was very pretty, with fair smiling meadow-land, shady

lanes, and green English hedgerows. The road soon left Ashgrove behind, and led in almost a straight line to the village of Elburton, about a mile distant, at the commencement of which stood the small ivy-clad church, with its heavy square tower, and its garden-like churchyard.

Close beyond was the Rectory, where lived Mr. Knight, the Rector of Elburton and Ashgrove, with his wife and family. Mr. Knight was an elderly man, in delicate health,—consequently a large proportion of parish work devolved upon his curate. The morning sermon, and generally the reading of the evening prayers, were undertaken by himself, but the entire afternoon service, as well as the morning prayers and the evening sermon, fell to the share of Mr. Lyster. The management also of the Sunday-schools, and of Sunday-school teachers and district-visitors, besides parochial labour among the poor in both villages, though nominally shared by Mr. Knight, were often undertaken by the curate alone. His office was indeed no sinecure, nor was it worth much in point of remuneration. A hundred and fifty pounds per annum, even with the aid of an additional twenty pounds of Mrs. Lyster's, formed no magnificent income. What with house-rent, taxes, poor-rates, and the servant's wages, besides other incidental and unavoidable expenses, little enough was left to feed and clothe a family of thirteen, exclusive of the maid-of-all-work.

CHAPTER II.

"So she strove against her weakness,
Though at times her spirit sank.
* * * * * *
But a trouble weighed upon her.
And perplexed her night and morn."
TENNYSON.

IT was a very silent walk, so far as Elsie was concerned. She paced steadily along, with downcast eyes, while Ethelbert remained by her side, casting wistful glances into her face, of which she was quite unconscious. The other children marched in front with tolerable quietness, until they were beyond the village, and then they raced about and shouted with glee. Their very merriment jarred upon Elsie's feelings, yet she would not check them. Not till they had nearly reached Elburton did she happen to look towards Ethelbert, and encounter his sober solicitous gaze.

"What is it, Bertie?" she inquired involuntarily.

"Netta said you weren't well," gravely replied the child. "Does their noise tease you, Elsie? I'll try to keep them quiet, if you like."

"Oh, no, let them play." But her hand stole into his for a moment, in gratitude for the sympathy expressed in his face. "Why don't you go too? It is so stupid for you to walk quietly like this."

"I'd rather stay with you. Are you going to see Miss Carrington, Elsie?"

"I don't know. Yes, I think I shall. If I do, and you all go into the garden, will you take care, Bertie, that Willie and Freddie don't do any mischief? I think I may trust Myra and Harold."

"I'll be *sure!*" said Bertie emphatically. "Here we are."

It was a small plain cottage-like house at which they stopped. But the garden was gay with flowers, and if the house was small, it was pretty and tasteful within. Elsie entered the gate, and went up the narrow gravel-walk, with the air of one who was accustomed to come and go at will. A tall straight figure was stooping over a rose-bush, and turned at the sound of the children's voices. Sharp, angular, and even harsh as were the features, the expression was kindly, and the manner warm though blunt. She extended both hands to the new comers.

"Well, Elsie, acting nurse as usual. How do you do, Myra? How do you do, Bertie?"

"Is Miss Carrington pretty well, to-day, Miss Amelia?"

"A great deal better than you are, child. That's easy to see at a glance. What has come over you?" and Miss Amelia laid a heavy hand upon each of Elsie's shoulders. "Look up, and tell me what is wrong."

Elsie's face drooped instead of looking up, and she made no answer.

"Go and tell her all about it," said Miss Amelia, bestowing upon Elsie a friendly little push. "I am not such a good hand at giving advice as Margaret is. And you want *something* most certainly, whether it is advice, or whatever it is. Come, run along, you may leave the children with me. I shall enjoy a chat with sober Bertie and merry Harold, and Myra shall be nursemaid to the twins. Get along with you, child."

Elsie obeyed, smiling. She entered the house, and passed through the small matted hall, into the shady

sitting-room. In an easy-chair near the window was a lady, whose age it would have been difficult to determine from her appearance. The smooth brow and clear eye might have belonged to thirty years, but the hair was grey, and the whole frame looked infirm and weak. The latter circumstance, however, might have been owing rather to illness than to age.

"Elsie, my dear!" she said, raising her eyes at the sound of a step; "I fancied I heard your voice in the garden. How are you all to-day?"

The smile had faded by this time from Elsie's face. She gave her friend a kiss, then sat down silently upon a large square stool by Miss Carrington's side. Neither spoke again immediately.

"Well, Elsie, what is it?" asked Miss Carrington at length. "You don't look bright and well to-day."

"I don't feel so," said Elsie, raising herself more upright. "I feel just the opposite."

"The old troubles, Elsie?"

"Old! Yes, they are old. But they seem to grow worse every day."

"Nay, my dear, the cross should rather grow lighter with long wearing."

Elsie caught her breath, with a gasp as if of pain.

"It grows heavier—heavier every day," she repeated. "Sometimes I don't know how to bear it. Everything seems dark and miserable."

"Everything! Not surely the love which can never change or grow cold."

"I don't know, Miss Carrington. I seem to lose sight of it sometimes."

Miss Carrington's fingers gently touched Elsie's brow.

"Well," she said slowly, "the sun is always shining,

although clouds often hide its face. And our Saviour's love is always shining on us and around us, yet clouds sometimes conceal it from our weak eyes. Overwork, weariness, headache, may act as such a cloud. At times I am afraid it arises from a murmuring spirit. I have found it so myself."

"I can't help it. I know it is so. But I cannot help it. I cannot be happy or contented. I cannot overcome the longing."

"What longing, dear?"

"The old longing,—to know more, to study more. Oh, I seem sometimes positively to *ache* with the thirst for knowledge, and yet it is not within my reach. No leisure, no books,—only work, and trouble, and anxiety, and noisy children! I don't know how to bear it."

"There is only one way," said Miss Carrington, pressing Elsie's hand, which was cold and trembling with excitement. "By 'casting all your care upon Him' who has seen fit to lay this cross upon you." And, after a moment's thought, Miss Carrington slowly repeated—

> "Who would be God's must *trust*, not see,
> Not murmur, fear, demand;
> Must wholly by Him guided be,
> Lost in that loving hand:
> Must turn where'er He leads—nor say—
> Whither, oh whither points the way?"

The words and tone alike were soothing. Elsie sat with her face resting on her hand, in deep thought. Presently she remarked abruptly—

"I don't see how it is possible for me to conquer my love of study. It seems to be a part of my very self."

"You are not required to conquer it, dear. The love of knowledge is not wrong. It is the discontent and repining which are wrong. Come, cheer up, Elsie. Things cannot go on for ever in this way. By and by I hope you will have more leisure."

Elsie shook her head. "I wish I could think so. There is more to do every year."

"It will not always be so," repeated Miss Carrington. "By and by there will not be so many of you at home. The boys will go out into the world. Myra will be a help instead of a hindrance. You must try to look on the bright side of things."

"As Netta does. But I am not like her."

"But you may be like her in this. Though I grant it is not so easy to see things in their best aspect through headache and fatigue, as through perfect health."

"O no; it makes such a difference."

"And you are not very well to-day, poor child!"

"But I am better for talking to you," said Elsie, with a smile. "Netta sent me here, because she says you always cheer me up. Only I think we ought to go home now. There is so much work to be done."

"Mending, do you mean? I wish I could help you with it, but that is impossible." And she glanced at her right hand, which had been crippled by the same accident which had caused her lameness. "And Amelia is always so much occupied in the parish that I am afraid I could not ask it of her. I wish we could help you in some substantial way, Elsie; but you know we are only poor people."

"Please, Miss Carrington, don't say such things,"

entreated Elsie. "If you do, I shall be afraid to come and tell you all my troubles."

"That would be a loss for me as well as for you, so I must take care not to frighten you away. To turn to another subject. Have you seen or heard anything of the Marshalls,—our new neighbours that are to be?"

"O no, nothing. Netta and mamma were talking about them this afternoon, I think, but I don't know what they said. I would rather have some new books than new friends, Miss Carrington."

"For shame! you unsociable child. Well, I will not detain you, for I see you are in a hurry to depart. Good-bye, my dear." Miss Carrington looked for a moment with kind solicitude into the tired face. "Keep up a brave heart, Elsie, and don't allow yourself to repine. "Take courage, be patient, and comfort will come to thee in due time.'"

In the garden Elsie found Miss Amelia busily engaged in supplying the children's demands for "stories," of which she possessed an inexhaustible fund.

"Come already, Elsie!" she exclaimed. "Now I call that a shockingly shabby visit. But you look more like yourself—more like what yourself ought to be, I mean. Must you really go? Want to get home in time for tea. Ah, well, of course it won't do to keep them all waiting. Oh, nonsense! you haven't stayed a moment too long. But I won't keep you. Run along, children."

Miss Amelia lingered to see them out of sight, and then went into the parlour, pulling off her gardening gloves, and heaving an emphatic sigh, that drew a questioning glance from her sister.

"It is a pity, a great pity!" she said. "A fine girl like that to be turned into a mere nursemaid to a troop of babies."

"Poor child!" said Miss Carrington.

"And she looks already as oppressed as if she had the burden of thirty or forty years upon her shoulders. Mind and body will be worn out in ten years at this rate."

"I trust not, Amelia. I hope Mr. Lyster's circumstances may improve. It is sad to see such pressure upon such young girls."

"It is not Mrs. Lyster's fault either. She takes double and treble her share of the work as it is, whenever Netta will give her a chance of doing so. I never saw such a bright unselfish creature as Netta is. But somehow one pities Elsie more. It is such power of mind and intellect thrown away."

"Not thrown away," said Miss Carrington gently.

"Perhaps not in one sense, but if she were a more ordinary girl she would be twice as happy, and there is little hope at present that she will be able to make any use of her powers. Well, I must be off. I have to speak to Mrs. Scott about sending her children more regularly to the Sunday-school. You don't want me for the next hour?"

Miss Carrington answered in the negative. After her sister's departure she sat for some time, with her hands clasped, and a troubled look on her face.

"No, not thrown away," she repeated at length, half aloud. "Not thrown away. He who gave the talents will find his own use for them. It is all right and well for her, I don't doubt. But the cross is heavy, and no wonder she feels it."

CHAPTER III.

"The sunshiny member of the family, who has the inestimable ırt to make all duty seem pleasant, all self-denial and exertion easy ınd desirable, even disappointment not so blank and crushing; who is like a bracing, crisp, frosty atmosphere throughout the ıouse, without a suspicion of the element that chills and pinches."

COMMONPLACE PHILOSOPHER.

"NETTA, is tea nearly ready?"

"Nearly, mamma," replied Netta, setting upon the able a large quartern loaf. There was a cloth spread, ıld and threadbare, and darned in numerous places, ıut spotlessly neat and clean. The tea-service was of ılain white china. A small—very small—pat of butter lanked the loaf. There were also a large pile of ıread and dripping, a small pile of hot toast and drip-ıing, and a jug of milk, but no sugar. This was all. Netta, however, looked very smiling and satisfied, as, n her peculiarly graceful and delicate manner, she as-igned each cup and plate to its proper place, and ar-anged the chairs round the table.

"Toast and dripping!" said Mrs. Lyster. "Oh, Netta, my dear, how could you make yourself so hot? t really was not worth while."

"My cheeks will soon cool again, mamma, and the ıoys are so glad of a little change."

"But will it not grow cold? It is almost a pity ·ou did not leave it by the kitchen fire."

"Papa and the boys have come in, mamma. And here is Elsie passing the window with the children. But I can cover it with a plate, to keep it warm. Now will fetch the urn."

"Is Phœbe too busy to bring it?"

"Best not to interrupt her, mamma. She has quite enough to do."

And Netta left the room just as the three elder boys entered it.

"Well, Gerard, have you had a nice ramble?"

"O capital, mamma," replied the youngest—not the one addressed. "Gerard didn't care, but we have had lots of fun. We've seen the oddest little creature you ever heard of. Wasn't she, Vernon?"

"Yes, but the other was not," said Vernon.

"No, there were two," said Nugent. "Vernon was quite smitten with one of them. He thought he had never seen such a beauty."

"I said nothing of the kind," returned Vernon rather indignantly. "Why, I never saw any girl yet to compare to Netta in the way of beauty. I suppose I may admire a girl, without thinking her the prettiest in the world."

"Well, I know one thing," remarked Nugent, "and that is, that Netta was never dressed as *she* was. I don't mean smartly, mamma, but just everything as it should be."

"Ay, but if Netta were dressed in the same way, she would beat the other hollow," said Vernon. "Come, we haven't told mamma yet about the little oddity. She didn't look more than twelve years old in height, mamma, but her face might have belonged to a girl of twenty."

"Yes, it was so queer and grave," added Nugent, "with a long nose like a grown-up person. And she had a lot of light hair hanging down her back—not pretty light hair, but the very palest yellow, with a whitish tinge over the whole."

"What a charming description!" said Netta, who ıad just entered the room. "I hope it does not be- ɔng to Miss Marshall. Vernon, will you lift the urn n the table for me. Thank you,—it was rather heavy. Iere come the children. Now, boys, sit down quietly, ɔr papa is tired."

Seats were taken rapidly, and with much less noise han might have been expected, from the number of hildren, and the confined accommodation. Mrs. Lyster ıut away her work, and rose, just as her husband ntered. There was a moment's pause, and all stood p while he said grace, after which he sat wearily .own in the chair placed for him.

He was a tall thin pale man, with an intellectual ace, but a worn oppressed look, and melancholy dark yes. A constitution, not naturally strong, had been nfeebled still further by years of hard work, and of verwhelming anxieties. With a nervous sensitive na- ure, deep strong feelings, and delicate health, what vonder if his faith and patience should at times al- ıost fail him, beneath the accumulated pressure of in- essant toil and incessant trouble. The trust of a man ar stronger than he might well have given way be- ıeath the load. Faith, indeed, often triumphed, but he struggle was fierce and oft-repeated, and left its races in his face and form.

Very different was Mrs. Lyster from her husband. ;he must once have been remarkably pretty and fas- :inating. She was still tall and graceful, her blue :yes were still dark and soft, though less bright than ormerly, and her manners were most winning, with heir mingling of gentleness and decision. As a girl, he had possessed an unusually high flow of spirits,

and even now her almost unvarying cheerfulness and unflagging energy were marvellous to behold. She was the life and mainspring of the house,—frequently up and about at five o'clock in the summer mornings, and an hour later in winter; leading everything, directing everything, working, contriving, ever engaged in the arduous task of "making both ends meet,"—yet never seeming to despond. A strong calm faith was hers, that seemed to rise above present trial,—a beautiful trust that nothing could shake. Yet she looked far from robust; her hands and cheeks were very thin, and a red ingrained flush upon the latter, contrasting with the pallor of the rest of the face, seemed to tell of a mind and body overtasked.

Netta was very like what her mother had been at her age. The tall slender figure, the small well-set head, the sparkling smiling blue eyes, so dark in hue that at times the colour might almost have been mistaken for brown, the fair features, the little laughing mouth, were what none could see without admiring. Her whole appearance too was so sylph-like, every step so light, every movement of the little hands so daintily yet unaffectedly graceful, that it was no wonder her parents should be proud of her. And her sweetness of temper, unselfish ways, and buoyant spirits, made her not only a universal favourite, but in truth a perfect sunbeam in the house.

Elsie was only one year younger than Netta, and in height, as well as in the general outline of figure and features, there was indeed a resemblance between the two, but the peculiar lightness and grace of Netta's movements were wanting in her. She was grave and still. The faces too were different. In Elsie the brow

was more broad and full, giving promise of no small intellect; the eye was of an earnest, thoughtful hazel, sometimes lighting up and flashing with excitement, but usually quiet and languid; the mouth was compressed and sad; the face altogether was too anxious and depressed for one so young.

Gerard was the next in age, now nearly sixteen,—a dreamy silent reserved boy, with grey eyes deeply set beneath a massive forehead, and a face that might have been good-looking, though irregular, had it been less impassive. He confided in no one, conversed with no one, and Elsie sometimes declared that she believed he really cared for no one. If he did, he took no trouble to contradict her. So long as he was left to himself and his books, he was satisfied. When interrupted or disturbed, he grew pettish and irritable.

Very unlike him, again, was Vernon, about fifteen months his junior, tall and lithe in figure, frank and hearty in bearing, light and springy in his movements, with a merry smile, and sunny brown eyes that lit up the whole face. Nugent was just thirteen, rather short, stout, and less attractive than Vernon. Myra was a mischievous-looking girl of ten, with a rosy face and turned-up nose, resembling no one in the family except Harold, a little fellow of eight. Ethelbert was a year older than Harold, a serious quiet child, with large sympathizing eyes. He was devoted to his mother and elder sisters, and was often the greatest possible assistance with the younger members of the family.

Blanche would have been a most lovely child, but for the wan peevish look that clouded her face. Poor little thing! she scarcely knew what good health was, and the very love they all bore to her made it the

more trying to see her so feeble and sickly. The twins, Willie and Freddie, were fine plump little fellows, so much alike that one was often mistaken for the other. Even Mrs. Lyster was occasionally caught in the act of using the wrong name, though it was a rare occurrence.

A stranger, entering the room in the midst of the meal, would have been struck with the crowd of children, the hum of voices resembling a school, and the cramped space. But he would have been no less struck with the perfect refinement that characterized everybody and everything present,—an indescribable freshness and delicacy that seemed to pervade the very atmosphere. The furniture might be poor and scanty, but from constant rubbing it shone like polished mahogany, and scarcely a speck of dust was to be seen. The print dresses of Mrs. Lyster and the girls, the brown-holland roundabouts of the younger boys, and the jackets of the elder ones, might indeed be faded and threadbare, patched and mended, but they fitted to a nicety, and were scrupulously neat and clean. The eleven heads of hair, from Netta down to the twins, were as smooth and glossy as brushes could make them; the eleven pairs of hands such as the most delicately-gloved lady in the land need not have feared to grasp. Perhaps the very consciousness of inability to clothe their children according to their station made Mr. and Mrs. Lyster the more sensitively particular on these points. If so, they certainly succeeded in their aim. Not one of the boys could have been taken for other than the son of a perfect gentleman; not one of the girls for other than a lady by birth and education.

Tea went on quietly. Mugs of milk-and-water were handed to the younger ones, while the elder ones were favoured with cups of milk-and-water tinged visibly with tea. Mr. Lyster's was stronger. It was the only thing that revived him when wearied out with parish work, and Mrs. Lyster took care he should have the best that the teapot would afford. Her own cup, poured out last of all, might have been described as "water bewitched," and strong imagination must have been required to detect even a flavour of tea-leaves. The hot toast-and-dripping speedily disappeared. One piece was laid on Blanche's plate, but after a few mouthfuls she pushed it away, and leant back in her chair. A shade came over Mrs. Lyster's face for a moment, but she said nothing,—only cut a thin slice of bread, spread it with her own butter, and ate dry bread herself. Both Netta and Elsie followed her example, and the child made a good tea, without seeming to remark how it was obtained. If any one else observed it, nothing was said. Small instances of self-denial were too common to call for either remonstrance or admiration.

Mr. Lyster was the first to finish, and he rose without waiting for the others, but came back as he was about to leave the room.

"Netta, I want to ask your help," he said. Netta's bright face looked up responsively. "Mr. Knight has been talking to me about our little Church Missionary Association. He says that it is falling off, and we ought all to bestir ourselves. I have promised to canvass the place in search of fresh subscriptions."

"I will undertake part of it for you, papa," said Netta quickly. "Only I am afraid we must not ex-

pect any large result. The people are all so poor about here. Is there any particular hurry, or will it do if I go in a day or two?"

"I promised Mr. Knight that I would set about it at once, and he is going to do the same. If you could possibly have managed to visit a few cottages this evening, I should have been very glad."

Netta thought of the mending-basket, but she did not mention it, and a glance from her mother encouraged her.

"I will manage it, papa," she said cheerfully, and he gave her a subscription-paper to be filled in, then left the room. Netta sat in thoughtful silence until tea was finished, and the children had scattered themselves in various directions. Vernon and Ethelbert lent Elsie their aid in carrying away the tea-things—a task which was frequently undertaken by the girls. Their only servant was a young girl of eighteen, and though very steady and hard-working, she had almost more to do than she could manage, especially on washing days.

"Mamma," said Netta, in a low voice, "I don't want to trouble you, but do you think papa intends to give anything himself! I see Mr. Knight's name is down for a guinea, and Mrs. Knight for half-a-guinea, and Robert and Jessie for half-a-crown each—donations, all of them. I know papa subscribes yearly, but people will not think of that. It seems strange to ask others to give more, and not to set the example ourselves."

"Go and speak to him, dear," was Mrs. Lyster's answer, and Netta obeyed.

Mr. Lyster was in his study, and she knelt down

on a stool by his side, explaining her errand. He heard with a clouded face.

"You can put down half-a-crown for me, Netta," he said, drawing his hand across his forehead.

"Not if you think it best not," said Netta gently.

"No, no, you are right, dear. It is more than I can afford, but we must take it out of something else. As you say, we must set the example. It is little enough, but it is the utmost I can venture to give. I could not run into debt for such an object."

"Oh no," said Netta, with hearty assent. "Will you put your name down, dear papa? Thank you. I will try to have a good list to show you when I come back."

The parlour was still full of children, when Netta returned. Blanche was seated on the floor, leaning against her mother. Nugent, Myra, and Harold were engaged in a game of romps. Ethelbert was amusing the twins with a long fairy tale of his own invention. Gerard was frowning over a book, and Vernon was seated on the table, humming a song. Mrs. Lyster looked inquiringly at her daughter, and Netta showed her the paper.

"Mamma, do you really think you can spare me this evening? I would have told papa how much there was to be done, but I did not like to worry him."

"Best not, dear. Oh, yes, you must go, and Elsie and I will get on with the work."

"I shall have time for a good deal after I come back," remarked Netta. "Vernon, will you come with me, and Nugent?"

Vernon sprang up readily. Nugent looked round.

"What for? Subscription begging? Much obliged. I hope you don't expect to fill up that paper. Here, let me see it. Oh, I say, Netta, that's too bad!—a guinea from Mr. Knight, and only one half-crown from papa—no more than from Jessie or Robert. I wonder you can have the face to ask for a penny, with that staring you in the face."

A painful flush passed over Mrs. Lyster's cheeks, and Netta's usually smiling blue eyes flashed with anger.

"Nugent, how can you talk so foolishly? Papa has given what he can, and no one but himself has a right to judge how much it should be. If we were richer, he would give more. Vernon, I am going upstairs to dress, and I shall be back directly." Netta left the room as she spoke, Vernon remarking—

"I always like to see Netta fire up like that. But, mamma, can't papa really do more? *We* know what he is, of course, but people will think it shabby."

"He would give more if it were possible, Vernon," Mrs. Lyster answered gently, and the boy looked thoughtful.

"Mamma," interposed Nugent, "I want a new necktie awfully. Mine's not fit to be seen. One of the fellows laughed at me about it to-day."

"It is not so bad as Gerard's," said Vernon.

"Gerard doesn't care what he wears. I don't mind so much now, but when the holidays are over it will be horrid. Fancy going to school with a patch like this on my jacket. It's the worst I ever had yet."

"Nugent, what is the use of making a fuss about it?" said Elsie, looking up impatiently from her work. "You know that we can't afford new things. If wear-

ing old clothes were our only trouble, we should not be very badly off. You should have the mending of them for a month."

"If I had, I suppose it wouldn't improve my jacket," retorted Nugent. "That's what I want. May I have a necktie, mamma?"

"Not yet, Nugent, I think," was the quiet answer, and just then Netta entered the room, already equipped for her walk, so that no more was said on the subject.

The Ashgrove cottages came first, and Netta went with Vernon into one after another, explaining the object of her call in her own peculiarly winning manner. Subscription beggars are not usually very welcome visitors, yet Netta was such a favourite that she was welcomed almost everywhere, and the list of monthly pence and threepences was soon longer than she had ventured to expect. Not that she escaped rebuffs. In one instance, especially, the refusal was not pleasantly given. It was at the cottage of a certain John Scott and his family—a shabby ill-kept place. Vernon made a face at the bare idea of asking for subscriptions there, but he followed Netta submissively up the garden-path—though garden in truth it could not be termed. Several ragged children were playing about the doorway, within which sat Scott himself, smoking and lounging. He stood up to allow Netta to pass, and listened while she explained to Mrs. Scott her reason for coming, but he vouchsafed no remark. Mrs. Scott heard with a dull stare.

"I dare say it's very fine, Miss, a-givin' money to the heathen, but it seems to me—no offence, Miss—as how John had best see after his own family, afore he troubles about them niggers."

"I think so too," said Netta, quietly. "But the one need not prevent the other, Mrs. Scott. We must look first to our own homes, but that ought not to prevent us from also sending missionaries and Bibles to the poor ignorant heathen. I do not ask much, but even a penny a month is of use."

"I'm sure, Miss, we haven't got no pennies to spend on such things," said Mrs. Scott, half inclined to whimper. "Ask John, there. John, here's Miss Lyster a-wantin' money to buy Bibles for the niggers."

"Let them buy 'em as wants 'em," curtly responded John, with a puff of smoke. "Who's a-goin' to give?"

"This list has only just been begun," said Netta, opening it. Mrs. Scott read aloud for her husband's information the first three or four names, with an emphasis upon the words—"The Rev. Frederick Lyster, two-and-sixpence."

"Well, John, what'll ye do?"

"I'll not give a farthing," said John shortly, and Netta, feeling that the matter was hopeless, did not press it further. She lingered a minute to ask after the children, and then left the cottage. They were scarcely out of the garden, when they heard Scott's loud laugh, and roughly-uttered—

"Pretty good, that! The curate gives half-a crown, and then wants us poor folk to make up for his stinginess. Let him buy the books himself, if he wants 'em."

Vernon's cheek burnt, and he clenched his hand, while Netta's lip quivered and her eyes swam.

"The insolent fellow!" muttered Vernon. "How dare he speak so? I would make him repent it, if I did not despise him too heartily."

"Oh, hush!—don't talk so, Vernon. Scott is a poor

ignorant fellow, and knows no better. He cannot understand. And I expected nothing from them."

"Then what made you go there at all, Netta?"

"If I had not, papa would have felt bound to do so," she replied, and Vernon looked at her with instinctive admiration.

"I should like to know whether you ever think of yourself before others," he said. "For my part, I think it a downright shame that papa and you should be exposed to this sort of thing. If clergymen are expected to give to everything, they ought to have it in their power."

"I know it seems so to us," said Netta; adding more cheerfully, "Well, there is one comfort, Vernon, that however poor we are, we have no disagreements among ourselves, as is the case in so many families."

"I think I could put up with a few disagreements for the sake of a hundred a year more," Vernon muttered, and then they walked on in silence. Presently he began humming a nautical song.

"The sea your theme, as usual," said Netta, smiling.

"Always will be, I hope. Don't I long to go!"

"But, Vernon, when do you intend to speak to papa?" asked Netta, rather gravely.

"Well, I've been thinking about it lately, and it is quite time things should be settled. I believe I am half afraid to bring matters to a point, for fear anything should stop my going. Of course I am too old for the Royal Navy, and I have always known that to be out of the question, on account of the expense. But I don't care how I go. I think I would rather be a cabin-boy than live on land."

"You would not think so long, if you once tried

going in that capacity. Still, I really should advise you to tell papa your wish. I wonder you have left it so long."

"Why, you see, the reason I haven't said anything lately is, that I spoke to him a year ago, and then he seemed to take it as a mere fancy—almost a joke. He laughed, and told me the idea would soon wear off. But it hasn't. I have waited all this time, and now I can tell him that it has grown stronger every month. I'll speak to him this very evening, Netta. Don't you think it best? Oh, are you going to see Miss Carrington?"

CHAPTER IV.

"He sure must conquer who himself can tame."
GOLDSMITH.

"Thus when by earth's cross lights perplexed,
We crave the thing that should not be,
God, reading right our erring text,
Gives what we would ask, could we see."
THE THREE WAKINGS.

"WHAT! is it Netta? How do you do, my dear? This is an unexpected pleasure. Two of you in one day! We are not often so favoured. I suppose you know that Elsie came this afternoon."

"I hope you count me as a third, Miss Amelia," said Vernon.

"You! Oh dear no! I don't count you boys. Elsie brought a whole batch with her. Come in; come both of you into the drawing-room."

"Perhaps you will not be so ready to welcome us when you know our errand," said Netta, when seated by Miss Carrington. "Vernon and I are on a tour of

subscription and donation begging for the Church Missionary Society. Mr. Knight is very anxious that our Association should take a fresh start, and wants new subscribers."

"But, my dear, we are *old* subscribers," said Miss Amelia.

"Yes, but I am begging either an increased subscription or a donation from old subscribers, Miss Amelia."

"Not a bad thing. These little branch associations are rather apt to fall flat, and want an occasional rousing up. Well, Margaret?"

"I think we may give five shillings," said Miss Carrington, "as a donation. We could hardly promise it regularly."

Miss Amelia pulled a small leathern bag out of a drawer.

"Our charity-purse, Netta," she remarked. "It is pretty full now. Yes, it will spare five shillings. Here, my dear. Will that do?"

"Oh, thank you; I hardly dared to hope for so much," said Netta warmly.

"Put down 'The Miss Carringtons,' if you must put any name at all," said Miss Carrington. "We do things jointly, you know, and don't patronize separate purses. How are you all at home?"

"Very well, except Blanche, poor little darling! The heat tries her a good deal."

"Elsie does not look well," remarked Miss Carrington, while Miss Amelia and Vernon walked away into the conservatory.

"She seems tired and overdone to-day. Sometimes I wonder how she will manage when I leave home."

Miss Carrington was silent a moment, mentally con-

trasting the bright brave face now looking up into hers, with the pale downcast one she had seen in the same spot that afternoon.

"It will do her no harm, I think, Netta. Perhaps the very fact of not having you to depend upon may rouse her up to more energy."

"Elsie is not wanting in energy, Miss Carrington. She works hard enough."

"Ay, but she does it like a martyr. Like a martyr, I mean, in the common acceptation of the term; not like a martyr in faith and submission."

"Perhaps she will not be tried in that way. Sometimes I doubt whether I shall ever succeed in my wish."

"There is no reason why you should not. Many a young governess is less prepared for her work than you are. What you do know, you know thoroughly."

"Yes; reading, writing, spelling, grammar, arithmetic, geography, and the rudiments of history, together with a slight smattering of French and Latin," said Netta, smiling rather sadly. "I might do a great deal with French in three months, with a good teacher and hard study. As to music and singing, even if I had time to give to them, our piano is so poor, and so wretchedly out of tune, that I could do nothing with it. I know I might obtain, perhaps without much difficulty, a situation as nursery-governess, but that would be little help to those at home, except that there would be one less to clothe and feed."

"A way will open, Netta," said Miss Carrington. "Only pray and trust; you will see your path clear before you in time. Have you mentioned the plan yet to Elsie?"

"Not yet. At least she has heard nothing of it

lately. She must know that we have thought of such a thing. I know she would feel my going very much. We have never yet been parted, except the six months that I was at school, three years ago. I am always thankful that I worked so hard then. Papa and mamma could not venture on such an expense again for any of us. Sometimes I feel as if I ought to *make* leisure for study, and fit myself for the work of teaching. But then again I cannot resolve to leave more to mamma and Elsie."

"If you go away, it must fall to them," said Miss Carrington.

"Yes, but then I should be sending home money," said Netta, her face brightening at the idea. "What a delight it would be! I have had one advantage, certainly, and that is constant practice in teaching. With the exception of accomplishments, I could undertake any ordinary children up to twelve or fourteen years old. Perhaps before long I may have some opportunity for getting on with accomplishments too. But I must not stay longer now."

Vernon was still in the conservatory, talking to Miss Amelia, and listening with intense interest to long sea-stories concerning a certain sailor-brother of hers, who had died many years before. He came away very reluctantly, and they went together to several neighbouring cottages, meeting with varied success,—after which they retraced their steps along the broad dusty highway between Elburton and Ashgrove.

The sun had sunk, and grey twilight was settling down over the broad green fields. The two plodded on quietly, chatting as they walked. Suddenly Vernon stood still, with the half-whispered exclamation—

"There they are! The pretty one and the little oddity. Just look, Netta."

The "little oddity," as Vernon termed her, was a small short girl, with a grave singular face, black eyes, almost white eyelashes, and a profusion of the palest flaxen hair. Another girl, taller, and apparently older, with a shy bright blushing face, stood near, besides a middle-aged lady, well-dressed and pleasant-looking. The child was saying in a high determined tone—

"Then I won't go any farther, Miss Shelton. I don't like wandering about the country in this fashion. I am tired, and I shall sit down."

True to her word, down she sat on a patch of grass by the roadside, her blue silk dress spreading out into the dust. The lady looked perplexed.

"But, my dear Leila, we cannot remain here all night. Pray be reasonable, and let us hasten home."

"You shouldn't have brought me so far," returned the young lady. "You and Aimée always take such immense walks."

Just then Netta and Vernon passed by. Much to Netta's surprise, she sprang up and accosted them.

"Will you please tell me the quickest way to the Hall? We have lost ourselves."

"There is a short cut over the fields," replied Vernon, "if you don't mind some awkward stiles."

"I don't mind anything, but Miss Shelton hates stiles. Shelly, I'm going home over the fields."

The lady came to her side, looking much annoyed.

"You forget yourself, Leila," she said in a low tone.

"No, I don't," was the answer, with a wilful twist of the shoulders. "I like this young lady very much, and I want to know who she is. What's your name, please?"

Rude as were the words, there was a curious *naïveté* in the manner of the speaker that disarmed all offence, and brought a smile to Netta's lips, as she replied—

"Perhaps you will first tell me who you are, little girl?"

"I'm not a little girl, but I will tell you my name of course. I am Leila Fitzroy; and that is my cousin, Aimée Marshall; and this is Aimée's governess, Miss Shelton. She is trying to take care of me, you see. Now, who are you?"

"Leila!—Miss Fitzroy!—I cannot permit this," said her companion, seriously, adding to Netta, "I trust you will pardon Miss Fitzroy's rudeness. She appears quite to have forgotten herself. Come away instantly, Miss Fitzroy."

"Not till I know my way home, and who I am talking to," persisted the young lady decisively.

"Will you allow me to show you the road?" said Netta courteously, turning to the governess, whose evident distress she pitied, and glancing at Miss Marshall, who was crimsoning under her shady hat with shame at her cousin's conduct. "If we accompany you round this corner, we can point out to you the short cut leading to the Hall."

Miss Shelton hesitated, and as Miss Fitzroy was about to accept Netta's proposal, the latter added, "My father is Mr. Lyster, curate to Mr. Knight."

"Miss Lyster! Then I have heard of you before," cried Miss Fitzroy, highly delighted. "The old clergyman called with his eldest son a day or two ago, and the boy told me all about you."

"I hope he gave you no bad impressions," said Vernon, doubtful whether to laugh or be annoyed, while

Miss Shelton gratefully accepted Netta's offer of guidance, and strove in vain to silence her troublesome charge.

"Bad! Oh dear, no! He only made me want very much to see Miss Lyster. Are you the one he likes so much?" added Miss Fitzroy, appealing to Netta, and finishing her sentence, regardless of the hand that Miss Shelton placed before her mouth. "Shelly, dear, you needn't try to gag me."

"Miss Fitzroy, I shall certainly inform your mamma of your conduct," said the governess coldly.

"Do, Shelly!" responded the young lady, evidently not at all alarmed by the threat. "You needn't call me Miss Fitzroy, for you only do that when you are angry, and there's nothing to be angry about. Oh dear, I wish we were going to stay in Elburton, that I might know Miss Lyster. Aimée, you must get Aunt Marshall to make friends with Mrs. Lyster, and you can know Miss Lyster, and then when I come some day to pay you a visit, I can see plenty of her."

Netta thought matters had gone far enough, and she stopped.

"I have no doubt that you will easily find your way from here, Miss Fitzroy. You have only to cross that field, and go down the little lane beyond, and then you will reach the carriage-road that leads into the Hall grounds."

Aimée Marshall came a little forward, and said in a shy soft voice, "Thank you very much for helping us, Miss Lyster. I am sorry we have brought you out of your way. I hope we shall see something of you before long."

"I am glad to have been of any use to you," Netta replied with a smile, and she bowed and turned away

as she spoke, without appearing to notice Miss Fitzroy's outstretched hand. Vernon shook with laughter as they resumed their walk.

"Did you ever see such a queer little witch of a child, Netta? But isn't the other one nice? I am glad the queer one is Miss Fitzroy, and I hope we shall know Miss Marshall."

"I think we shall like her if we do. Yes, she seems very nice. But what a shame of Duncan to talk about us to strangers—for I suppose she means him."

"He hasn't, at all events, done you much harm in their estimation," laughed Vernon. "We have had quite a little adventure to talk about, have we not? Are you going in here? I should think you are nearly tired of subscription-begging for one day."

Netta, however, was not satisfied without trying all the cottages that lay in her path. Only one or two remained that she had not visited in her way out. It was not long before the business was accomplished, and they found themselves again at home. Netta went straight to her father's study, and Vernon followed her.

"Well, dear, what success?" asked Mr. Lyster.

"I have brought you the list, papa. I do not think it is bad on the whole."

Mr. Lyster glanced through the sheet, and then folded it up.

"Thank you, my dear, you have helped me very much," he said, and Netta went away with the bright look of one who loves to help others, even at the cost of personal pain and trouble.

Vernon did not follow her. He stood uneasily by the study-table, playing with a book, and looking so serious that his father saw something was on his mind.

"Have you anything to say, Vernon?"

"Are you busy to-night, papa? I can easily wait, only Netta advises me not to put off speaking to you?"

"I am not too busy to give you a few minutes," said Mr. Lyster, laying down his pen, and leaning back in his chair. "Is anything wrong?"

"No, papa; it is nothing of that kind. I want to speak about what I am to be." He paused a moment, then brought it out quietly—"May I go to sea?"

Mr. Lyster looked surprised.

"Go to sea! What has put that into your head?"

"I have wished it for years, papa,—ever since that visit which I paid to poor grandpapa at the sea-side. I told you some months ago that I wanted it."

"Did you? Ah, I recollect something of the kind. But I thought I had stopped all idea of such a thing."

"You laughed, papa, and said the fancy would soon pass off," said Vernon in a low voice. "But it hasn't. I want now more than ever to be a sailor. I can't tell you how I long for it. I don't think I *could* be happy on land."

"Hush! don't say that." And the tone sent a sudden chill over his hopes. Mr. Lyster rose, and paced the room in silence for two or three minutes. Presently he stood before the table, observing—

"After all, Vernon, it is merely a fancy. You would soon be heartily sick of the hardships of a sailor's life."

"I don't mind hardships, papa. One must have them wherever one is. And if it is a fancy, it has lasted two years and a-half."

Mr. Lyster sighed.

"I ought to have checked it long ago," he said. "It is out of the question that you should go."

Vernon made no answer, but in the somewhat dim ight of the single candle his father could see his very ips growing white.

"It grieves me more than I can tell to deny you our wish. If I were a rich man, I do not think the ea is what I should choose for you, but still I would ot refuse my consent if I saw a strong inclination that ray. As matters now stand, however, it is impossible. cannot afford to send you."

"I never thought of the Royal Navy," said Vernon uskily.

"The Royal Navy and the Merchant Service are qually out of your reach. Think about it quietly, Vernon. Come and sit down here. I want you to nderstand once for all the impossibility of the thing. You remember Mr. Knight's nephew, who went into he Merchant Service."

"Yes, papa," said Vernon, taking a seat as desired. I know that the sum of fifty or sixty pounds was paid efore each of his first three voyages. But it is not lways so."

"Perhaps not, where there is good interest. I cannot ay. I have no interest whatever in the Merchant Service."

"I would go as apprentice willingly, papa. No remium would be required then."

"You know all about it, I see! But, Vernon, as I aid just now, I have no interest whatever. And even upposing I had, there is another obstacle which appears to me insuperable. That is the expense of your utfit—the necessary outlay, not only on your first eaving home, but during the two or three years, if not nore, which must elapse before you could earn anyhing yourself. I do not see how I could by any pos-

sibility afford it. Even were your outfit the only difficulty, it would be insurmountable."

"I would not cost you a single penny more than was absolutely necessary," said Vernon, unable yet to relinquish his hope.

Mr. Lyster sighed again, and leant his forehead on his hand.

"I do not think you are fully aware of our circumstances, Vernon, but you are quite old enough to understand what I am going to say to you. Do you know that my stipend is only one hundred and fifty pounds a year, and that that, with twenty pounds a year of your mother's, forms my entire income. Out of this I pay over twenty pounds for house-rent and taxes, twelve for my insurance, and six to Phœbe. This leaves less than a hundred and thirty pounds for the food of fourteen, and the clothing of thirteen people. When I was a boy, I remember, my mother used to reckon that the food of each member of the family amounted to twenty or twenty-five pounds a year, while my sisters thought themselves positively stinted in being condemned to sixteen pounds a year for their dress. Do you see now how *exceedingly* limited my means are?"

Vernon was listening with repressed excitement to his father's calm melancholy tone.

"Papa, it is a shame! a wicked shame!" he burst forth. "You live for others, and it is a *shame* that you should have no more." The scene in the Scotts' cottage recurred to his mind, though with instinctive delicacy he would not add to his father's burden by repeating it.

"Hush, Vernon! that is not the right spirit for us.

If it were the will of our heavenly Father we should have more." And, half to himself, Mr. Lyster repeated the words—"Tarry thou the Lord's leisure; be strong, and He shall comfort thine heart; put thou thy trust in the Lord."

Vernon was silenced, but only for a moment. His eye fell on his father's worn face and thin hands, and he was struck with them as he had never been before.

"But you have been trusting for years and years, papa," he said, a flush coming over his cheeks.

"Trusting!" repeated Mr. Lyster sadly. "Ah, no, Vernon, not trusting as I would fain do, not resting my every care on Him who is ever ready to support us. I have waited and striven to trust, if you will, but they have been years of toil and weariness and unrest. The discipline has been a sore one."

He spoke dreamily, as if scarcely remembering to whom the words were addressed. Vernon had a struggle to conquer the hot tears that welled up into his eyes, and almost overflowed. Between burning sympathy with his father's troubles, now for the first time in a measure comprehended, and distress at the dark cloud which had settled down on his own prospects, he was nearly overcome. A last hope still remained, and so soon as he could speak steadily, he said—

"Papa, may I just remind you of one thing about my going to sea? I know it would be an expense, but it would be instead of the expense of my schooling."

"I pay nothing for that. Were you never told that Mr. Phillips most generously offered two years and a half ago to educate all three of you for a time, free of charge. But for that, I could not possibly send you to school."

Vernon sighed heavily, but his tone was cheerful when he replied—

"I see it can't be, papa. I must give it up."

"I am afraid it must be so, Vernon. It grieves me deeply to disappoint you of your wish, but I have no power to grant it."

"Papa, you must not mind about it," said Vernon eagerly, with a feeling of self-reproach, as he noted his father's saddened look. "I am sorry I spoke to you at all. It is of no consequence. I'll put the whole thing aside at once, and try not to think of the sea any more. I can get over it, and I will. I'll take the first thing that comes up—a clerkship, or whatever it is. I *will* be a help and a comfort to you, papa. Please don't tell mamma anything about our talk, for it is all settled now, and I don't want her to be worried. It's all right."

The bright cheerful words could not hide from Mr. Lyster the pale lips with which they were uttered. With a smile, in which pleasure and sadness struggled for the mastery, he held out his hand.

"You are a help and a comfort to me already, my brave boy," he said. "Thank God for giving me such a son."

A certain lump in Vernon's throat checked speech. He squeezed his father's hand, then hurried out of the room, and out of the house. It was an hour before he reappeared, and when he did, no traces were visible in his face of the battle which he had fought, and in which he had come off conqueror. The subject was not mentioned again. Netta alone heard the result of his conversation, and her affectionate sympathy was very grateful to him. Neither Mrs. Lyster nor Elsie

knew a word of what had passed. Vernon did not wish them to be troubled unnecessarily.

CHAPTER V.

"Like some long childish dream
Thy life has run."
A. PROCTER.

MRS. FITZROY reclined with an air of easy languor in one of the luxurious arm-chairs of the drawing-room at the Hall. She was stout and somewhat florid, yet with a general air of ill-health. A light rich Indian shawl was thrown over her shoulders, and, warm though the day was, she shivered occasionally, and drew it closer round her, declaring that she felt "quite chilly."

By the table sat her sister-in-law. Mrs. Marshall was very unlike Mrs. Fitzroy. Of middle height, neither stout nor thin, with smooth brown hair scarcely yet touched by grey, bright clear eyes, and ladylike manners, she was one to find her way into the hearts of all who knew her. Though for fourteen years a widow, she still wore something very much resembling a widow's cap, and no other kind of head-dress would so well have suited her face. No one thought of calling her handsome, but neither did any one think of calling her plain. If she had not beauty of feature she had beauty of expression, and that in large measure. Many a far prettier girl was less sought after than Mrs. Marshall in the days of her youth.

Presently the door was thrown open, and Leila Fitzroy rushed in, followed more quietly by her companions. Aimée came to the table, and stood there with her hat in her hand. It was curious to see the

contrast between the two cousins. Mrs. Fitzroy sometimes declared that though Leila was only fourteen in years, she was forty in mind, but that though Aimée was seventeen in years, she was only seven in mind. This was an exaggerated figure of speech. Certainly, however, Aimée's neat figure, dimpled cheeks, rounded chin, soft rosy mouth, opened smiling blue eyes, and fresh simplicity of character, made her appear younger than she really was. And though in actual powers of mind and regular education she surpassed Leila, yet in knowledge of life, and of the world in general, she was decidedly her inferior.

Perhaps there was no great disadvantage in this. Aimée's home had been to her a very "dove's nest" of peace and security. Mrs. Marshall had completely devoted herself to the training of her children. Aimée had never known the want of companions or of books. Yet both had been selected for her by her mother with wise discrimination, and, so far as was possible, none had been allowed to come in her way but those which Mrs. Marshall thoroughly approved. She leant upon her mother with an implicit trust and devotion, rare in these days of youthful independence.

Mrs. Fitzroy's plan with her daughter had been somewhat different from Mrs. Marshall's. When Leila could obtain her own way, she was allowed to take it. When this was not possible, she was petted and comforted. When she became troublesomely importunate, Mrs. Fitzroy indulged in mild complaints. Happily she was a girl to suffer less from this style of treatment than many others would have done. Still the result hitherto was certainly far less satisfactory than in the case of Aimée Marshall.

Leila's somewhat boisterous entrance was greeted by a deprecating, "My dear, *pray* be gentle," from Mrs. Fitzroy. The request made but small impression, however, for the young lady crossed the wide room with unabated haste, exclaiming—

"Mamma, who *do* you think we have seen?"

"Really, my dear, I cannot guess. You do not know many people about here. Was it Mr. Knight?"

"Oh, dear, no! But you burn—you burn."

"How, Leila?" asked Aimée, in surprise.

"Oh, *I* know, but I'm not going to tell. Come, mamma, guess."

"Mr. Duncan Knight?"

"No,—but you are nearer still."

"I cannot imagine who it was, my dear. You had better tell me."

"Oh, you *must* guess, mamma. Do you remember my telling you that Mr. Duncan Knight, when he called with his father, had talked to me about the curate, Mr. Lyster, and about Mr. Lyster's eldest daughter. I wanted to know what she was like, but he didn't seem able to describe her, only he said she was as pretty as she was good, and as good as she was pretty."

"Unless Miss Lyster were remarkably good, I should call that a doubtful compliment, my dear."

"But she is, mamma. She is *very* good. I asked Mr. Duncan Knight more about her, but he didn't seem able to tell me much. I wanted to know what colour her eyes were, but he couldn't say, only he knew they were lovely, and her face was lovely, and her hair was lovely, and she was lovely in every way. I kept it up because it seemed the only thing he cared to talk about. But boys are so stupid at describing."

"Boys!" repeated Mrs. Fitzroy, playfully pinching Leila's cheek. "Mr. Duncan Knight goes to college, and is nearly twenty-three, and will be ordained in a few months."

"He's a boy for all that,—or if he isn't, he looks like one," retorted the precocious Miss Fitzroy, tossing her flaxen head. "But don't you feel curious to know who I have seen? Aunt, can't you guess? Oh, has Aimée told you? What a shame!"

"It was not Miss Lyster, surely," said Mrs. Fitzroy. "You could hardly have recognized her from the description you have just given me."

"Not exactly, mamma, but I could guess, though I couldn't feel quite certain. Shelly and Aimée had taken me ever so far out of the way, and we had really quite lost ourselves, and I was tired and cross, so I sat down on the grass to rest myself, and to punish Shelly. Just then there came by a boy and a girl—a nice-looking boy, about fifteen or sixteen years old, I should think, and such a *sweet* girl with him. I took a fancy to her the moment I saw her, and I had an idea from the first that it was Miss Lyster, though she wasn't a bit like what I had expected from Mr. Duncan Knight's account."

"What was the difference, my dear?"

"Oh, I had imagined some one very beautiful and stately, and grand and good. But she isn't like that. She is only *very* pretty and sweet, with the most smiling eyes you ever saw, and such a dear little mouth. Oh, aunt Marshall, won't you make friends with the Lysters, and then if I ever come to Elburton again I can see a great deal of her?"

"I shall be very happy to do so, if they are such

desirable acquaintances as you consider them," said Mrs. Marshall.

"I have not interrupted you in your tale thus far, Leila," Miss Shelton interposed, gravely, yet with evident reluctance. "But I feel it my duty to inform Mrs. Fitzroy——"

"No; I shall inform mamma all about it myself," returned Leila, throwing back her long limp hair, and looking up in Miss Shelton's face with an expression of arch defiance. "It was very improper, mamma, but I couldn't make up my mind to lose the opportunity, so I asked her outright what her name was, and told her mine."

"My dear Leila!" said Mrs. Fitzroy, in a shocked tone. "I am sorry to hear it. There was no necessity for such a breach of manners. We might easily have made Miss Lyster's acquaintance in some more orthodox way."

"Yes, if there were time, mamma. But, you see, aunt Marshall goes into the Laurels on Thursday, and on Saturday we leave Elburton, and every day seems quite full of engagements. Oh, dear, it is so tiresome! But I said that Aimée must get aunt Marshall to make friends with Mrs. Lyster."

"Before Miss Lyster! Leila! Leila! Really, I shall be *quite* angry if you take such liberties with your aunt's name."

"Aunt Marshall is not angry. Are you, aunt?"

"No, dear,—though another time I would rather you should speak to me first on the subject. How did Miss Lyster receive your advances?"

"Oh, she was very quiet and ladylike,—just what mamma would have liked. Only she looked amused,

and the boy was positively giggling. They showed us the way, and then left us, and she bowed but wouldn't shake hands."

"Very right of her, when she had not been introduced to you," said Mrs. Fitzroy.

"And, do you know, mamma, she had on the oldest of old washed-out cotton frocks, and a straw hat, with only a bow of brown ribbon for trimming. But she couldn't have looked nicer in the grandest dress in the world. I wish *I* looked half as well."

"So you do, my dear," said Mrs. Fitzroy, with very motherly admiration of the quaint little face and yellow hair.

"No, I know I'm a fright, mamma," returned Leila decidedly. "But I don't mind that. Well, I'm going now to take off my things. I beg your pardon, dear old Shelly, for plaguing you so, but really the temptation was irresistible."

The singular child gave Miss Shelton a hearty kiss as she spoke, with a look so drolly penitent, that the governess could not resist a smile, and then danced out of the room, perfectly satisfied that her misdemeanours were all forgiven, and would soon be forgotten. Wayward as she was, there was certainly something lovable about her.

No second encounter took place between Netta Lyster and Leila Fitzroy. Before the next Sunday the Fitzroys had again taken their departure, the Hall was closed, and left as usual in the charge of the old housekeeper and her husband, and the Marshalls were settling down into their new house at the Laurels. It was not long before calls were exchanged between them and the Lysters, but each time they failed to

find one another at home, so that the acquaintance did not at first advance very rapidly. Occasionally Netta met Aimée and her governess out-of-doors, but beyond a bow and a pleased smile of recognition on either side, no intercourse took place.

This, however, was not to continue. One day a note was left at the door for Netta, which proved to be from Aimée Marshall, written in a pretty delicate hand, begging the pleasure of her company to dinner on the following Wednesday. Netta handed the note to her mother.

"Very kind of Mrs. Marshall, is it not? It is rather puzzling, though, to know what to do."

"I should like you to go, Netta, if it can be managed. It would be a pleasant change for you, dear."

"Only there is the want of time and the want of a dress."

"The want of time is nothing. One evening will not make such a very important difference. Your dress is the real difficulty. Miss Marshall says, you see, that they will be alone,—but still——"

"If I go, they must take me as I am," said Netta cheerfully. "Poor curates' daughters cannot be expected to make a very distinguished appearance. Mamma"—and she lowered her voice—"there is one reason why I do not like to refuse—I may in time ask their assistance in finding me a situation."

"I have already thought of the same thing. I don't know what we shall do without our sunbeam when that day comes, Netta."

"You have ten other sunbeams to fill my place, mamma. Then if papa does not object, it is settled that I am to go."

"If you can by any possibility make your clothes fit for such an occasion," said Mrs. Lyster, looking doubtful.

"I think I shall be able to manage. There is that old spotted brown muslin skirt of yours, which, if you will let me have it, will do nicely."

"You are welcome to anything in the house, dear. But that skirt—it is worn almost out."

"No, only faded, and I must not mind that. I ought to make myself a white body. May I have the little muslin frock which Blanche has outgrown? Poor old frock! it has done duty a long time. I remember when it was first made up for me, eleven years ago, out of that pretty white muslin of yours, and it has done good service for Elsie, and Myra, and Blanche, all in turn,—though it really has not been so very often worn."

"Use it by all means, dear, if it is not too rotten," said Mrs. Lyster, smiling. "You have quite an inventive genius on the subject of dress. But what will you do for a sash and trimming?"

"A quilling of the same stuff will do for trimming, and I will ask Elsie to lend me her black belt. It is less rubbed than mine. I shall do very well so, and make quite as much sensation, I dare say, as if I had the smartest silk in Winterton."

An invitation to dinner was quite an event in their quiet household, and boys and girls listened with wondering interest to the news. Gerard alone looked indifferent and walked away. Elsie asked what she would wear, and Myra heard with open eyes and mouth of the proposed transformation of the little old muslin frock into a white body.

"I wish I were going too," she said. "I've seen Miss Marshall three times, and I think she is very nice—at least her face is. May I help you in the work, Netta?"

"Will it be a party, Netta?" asked little Blanche.

"Oh no, dear, they will be quite alone, I am glad to say. It will be a pleasant change, perhaps, but I think I should be quite as happy staying at home with you all."

"Are you thinking of taking your departure, Netta?" inquired a voice at the door.

"Oh, Duncan, I did not see you. How do you do? Are you all quite well at home?"

"Very well, thank you," replied the young man, walking in. "I began to think we had lost you all, not having seen you for nearly two whole days."

"And the first words you hear on your entrance alarm you with the idea that Netta is meditating a flight from Ashgrove," laughed Vernon.

"But are you really going anywhere, Netta?" asked Duncan.

"Somewhere, certainly," said Netta, seeming slightly inclined to tease him. "I dare say such a travelled personage as yourself would not think much of the distance, but it seems rather an undertaking to me."

"I hope you are not going to stay away long," said Duncan, looking so much disconcerted that they could not keep their faces, and there was a general outburst of laughter. "What do you mean, Netta? Now, Blanchie, if you don't tell me, I won't speak to you again till—I don't know when."

"It is nothing," said Netta, recovering her voice,

"except that the Marshalls have asked me to dinner next Wednesday."

"The Marshalls! Wednesday!" repeated Duncan, greatly relieved. "Oh, that is nothing indeed. I was afraid you meant to banish yourself from Ashgrove during my vacation."

"By the by, Duncan, I never asked you to explain something which seriously offended Netta," said Vernon, "I don't know how I came to forget it. What did you mean by discussing her so freely to that little Miss Fitzroy when she was here?"

"Not *freely*," said Duncan eagerly, with a slight blush. "What could I do, Netta, when a little talkative girl beset me with questions concerning the whole neighbourhood, and wanted to know the name, age, and characteristics of every single individual in the parish?"

"I hope you gave her a good list," said Vernon. "After all, I think Netta forgave you. It was easy to see what the style of your remarks had been, from the fact that you had contrived to make the young lady fall in love with her, not *at* first sight, but *before* first sight."

"Have you seen anything of the Marshalls yet, Duncan?" asked Netta.

"Enough to know that I shall like them. Mrs. Marshall is a delightful person. And Miss Marshall is a nice little girl."

"Little girl! She is seventeen."

"She does not look it. A nice young lady, then."

"Is not her brother at home now from college?" inquired Vernon.

"He was to come to-day. I believe he has been

spending part of his vacation in Scotland. I have seen very little of him at Oxford, but I don't fancy he is a bad fellow on the whole. I only wish the Marshalls may ask me to meet you next Wednesday, Netta, but I am afraid there is no hope of that."

A word about the rector and his family before the close of the chapter. Mr. Knight has already been casually mentioned more than once, but it is time that he should receive more formal notice. In appearance he was rather tall, but stooping from habitual ill-health, full of fervour in the pulpit, but somewhat absent and dreamy out of it. By the sick-bed of a parishioner he was all tenderness and kindness, but at other times a little wanting in general sympathy. He was not naturally a genial character. He was too self-contained, too much absorbed in his own thoughts. Still, though hardly popular in his parish, he had lived there so long that he was well known, sincerely loved by many, thoroughly trusted and esteemed by all.

Mrs. Knight was a pretty lively little woman, and a very good mother to all her children, though perhaps unconsciously her affection for her eldest son was the most absorbing feeling of her heart. Duncan was taller and stronger in build than his father, whom he resembled in the possession of a good forehead and a finely-formed mouth. Otherwise he was not critically handsome. But the changeful expression and the brilliant smile which he inherited from his mother imparted a peculiar charm to his face. He was now concluding his course at the Oxford University, and it was hoped that in the following spring, by which time he would be twenty-three years of age, his ordi-

nation would take place. A curacy was already in view, under a clergyman whose living was in one of the northern counties, and who was himself an old friend of the Knights.

Netta and Duncan had been close friends and allies for years—indeed, ever since the Lysters had first come to Ashgrove. When Netta was a little fairy of eight, Duncan, a sturdy and particularly troublesome boy of twelve or thirteen, had been her devoted knight-errant upon every possible occasion. Wilful and high-spirited with others, he had ever been gentle and yielding with her. And the attachment on both sides had grown and strenghtened with their growth, year after year. With Netta, indeed, it was still the simple unconscious affection of a sister—or if it had already changed and deepened into something different, she was as yet unaware of the alteration. But Duncan had long ceased to speak of her as his sister—had long ceased to think of her in any such light.

She was so much at her ease, so frank and simple and unconscious with him, that he could not be otherwise with her, and this perhaps blinded the eyes of their parents to what must otherwise have been perceptible enough. Mrs. Knight alone saw what no one else seemed to notice, that Duncan cared for no one and thought of no one while with Netta, and never seemed satisfied when absent from her. But she loved Netta dearly, and if she would have preferred a better marriage for her son in a pecuniary point of view, there was no one in the world that she would have liked so well for Duncan's wife. Besides, she felt that she could do little to check the course of events. Duncan must at times come home,

Netta must remain at Ashgrove; and so long as were within reach of each other, she could not Duncan from Netta's side, even if such had her wish.

ɔometimes it seemed to her scarcely fair not to Mrs. Lyster a hint of what was passing, but then ı she argued, Mrs. Lyster might see for herself matters stood. Why should doubts be stirred up, perhaps uncomfortable feelings be roused, so long ıings proceeded quietly? If she had felt that she ıer husband would disapprove of the connection, ight have been her duty to speak either to the ers or to Duncan, but in the present state of rs nothing of the kind was necessary. And if can's prospects were not altogether such as a ıer might wish for her daughter, they were, at all ıts, better than Mr. Lyster's had ever been. So Knight said nothing, but watched and waited, sometimes smiled with quiet amusement at the ıliar blindness displayed by every one except elf.

CHAPTER VI.

"A smiling look she had, a figure slight,
With cheerful air, and step both quick and light."
A. PROCTER.

WEDNESDAY came, and with a somewhat beating t, though with outward composure, Netta found elf walking through the garden of Mrs. Marshall's ıe, at the time appointed.

A double row of fine laurels—whence the name—ted the winding carriage-drive, which led from the to the large circular lawn opposite the front door.

The building itself was low and wide, with a flat-roofed projecting wing on either side, thickly overgrown with creeping plants. On the gravel walk which surrounded the lawn, stood Aimée in an attitude of expectation, with her little brown dog by her side. A pretty figure she was, in a softly-falling white cashmere dress, with a blue ribbon in her hair, and a shy flush upon her cheeks. Netta no sooner appeared round the bend of the laurel-walk than she hurried forward to meet her with an eager welcome.

"I am so glad it is fine. I was afraid it would rain, and that you would not come. Miss Lyster, will you come indoors, and take off your things? You must be tired."

"Not in the least, thank you," Netta replied, smiling. "I don't consider it anything of a walk from our house."

"No—I am glad it is not far. Miss Lyster, I am afraid you will find it very dull this evening, but we have no one coming to meet you. You know we have scarcely any friends here yet, because we have been such a short time in Elburton. And I thought we should see more of one another, if we were alone."

"Indeed I like it very much the best," said Netta warmly. "It is so kind of Mrs. Marshall to ask me."

Aimée was leading her across the hall to the wide staircase, and they mounted the first flight in silence. It was a pretty room which they entered, replete with every comfort and convenience, yet perfectly simple. Netta thought it looked very like its owner.

"This is my bed-room," Aimée remarked. "I think I shall grow very fond of it in a little while. I feel at home in it already, because the furniture is the same that I have been accustomed to."

"You lived in London, did you not, before coming here?" asked Netta.

"Yes, for three years, and before that in the country. Mamma does not like the town."

Netta laid her hat on the bed, and then moved a little nearer to the table. A photograph on a stand had attracted her attention. Aimée came to her side, saying in a grave subdued tone, "It is papa."

"He was not like you," said Netta gently.

"No, I am thought rather more like mamma. I don't remember him at all. I was only just three when he died."

Netta looked in silence for a minute, then inquired, "And is this Mrs. Marshall?"

"Yes, at least it is meant for her. Mamma never photographs well. You don't get the bright expression. Oh, I think I must show you my presents, Miss Lyster. It is my birthday to-day."

"Indeed! I did not know it, or I would have wished you many happy returns, Miss Marshall."

"Don't call me Miss Marshall, please," pleaded Aimée. "It sounds as if you did not like me. You know I am quite a child still—only just seventeen."

Netta smiled. It seemed a long while since her own childhood.

"Then you are only a year and a quarter younger than I am," she remarked. "If you are Aimée to me, I must be Netta to you, dear."

"Are you only eighteen? Oh, I am so glad. I was afraid you were much older," and Aimée's hand closed round Netta's with a soft clinging grasp, peculiar to herself.

"Would you like to come downstairs now, Miss Lys—Netta, I mean?"

"Will you not let me see your presents first?" asked Netta, moving towards the little round table on which they were laid.

Another thought had come into Aimée's mind, making her hold back. She felt sure that Netta, the daughter of a poor curate, the eldest of eleven children, never had such gifts, and a hot flush suffused her cheeks at the bare idea of even appearing to parade her superior advantages. Netta did not seem to observe this, but added quietly—

"I have not many opportunities of seeing pretty things, so I always enjoy them very much when they come in my way."

"If you really care for it——" said Aimée. "They are not much to see after all, only they are things that I like very much to have. Are you fond of reading, Netta?"

"Very, but I have no time, and not many books. Have all these been given to you this morning?"

"Yes, four of them came by post. My brother Dudley gave me this one. Is it not handsomely bound? I shall be so glad to lend them to you whenever you feel inclined to read them."

"Thank you—I shall like it very much some day, dear. What a pretty workbox!"

"That is from aunt Fitzroy. And the gold thimble inside is from Leila. That is from Dudley, too. You have not seen him yet, have you? He only came home on Monday. He is three years older than I am. Look, Netta, this is what mamma gave me—my best present of all."

It was a large gold locket, suspended round her hroat by a slender gold chain. She took it off, and ›ut it into Netta's hands. In one side was a lock of ıair. In the other was a portrait—a small beautifully-ınished vignette of a rather handsome boy, not unlike ıimée in face, but much darker.

"My brother Norman," Aimée said, as Netta looked ;p inquiringly. "That was taken ten years ago, before ıe went out to India. I think it was very like him hen, only I can't remember him quite distinctly. He ıust be very much altered now. He is nearly twenty-even—quite twenty-seven, I mean."

"You must wish very much to have him home gain," said Netta.

"Oh, yes, it would be delightful. I hope he will :ome before long. He has been out now almost ten 'ears. But it is not the same for me as for mamma. was such a child when he went out that I only just emember a nice merry boy, who was always very :ind to me—though he did tease me sometimes. Poor namma longs to have him home again. She could ıot help crying a little this morning, when she gave ne the locket. And to me of course Dudley is much nore than Norman can be, because I have forgotten ıim so much."

"You will find all the old feeling come back as :trongly as ever directly you see him again," remarked Vetta.

"Yes, I am sure of that. Because I do love him 'ery much, only he always seems a *little* like a stranger. can't think of anything but a boy, and all the time know he is a man. But of course when he comes

home, I shall soon grow accustomed to him as he is, and not think any more about what he used to be."

"Have you had no likenesses of him later than this?" asked Netta, returning the locket.

"Oh, once or twice he has sent home photographs. But Indian photographs are so bad. I am quite sure Norman never could have grown up with such a yellow melancholy face as he has in the photographs. Mamma could not make up her mind to burn them, though she said it would be the best thing to do, but she hid them away, and we never look at them."

"I think a bad likeness is worse than no likeness at all," said Netta, as Aimée led her out of the room. "You could not have a pleasanter one than that in the locket."

"Oh no, it is so kind of mamma to give it to me. She has only one other of him. This is the way to the drawing-room."

Mrs. Marshall was there, engaged in writing a letter. She rose, however, on the entrance of the girls, and came to meet Netta with a warm welcome. Whatever she might have thought of the faded brown muslin skirt and the exceeding simplicity of her guest's attire, she appeared perfectly unconscious of both. It was the first time they had met, and she was indeed so struck with the grace and refinement, which were even more remarkable in Netta than the actual beauty of feature, that at first she scarcely noticed anything else.

"Aimée has been looking forward all day to seeing you," she said. "I must introduce my son to you, Miss Lyster."

A young man rose and advanced from his seat in the window. Rather good-looking, though scarcely

handsome, Dudley Marshall's chief characteristics in the sight of a casual observer, were a pair of keen half-grave half-satirical grey eyes, a comical little twist in the corners of his mouth, a quantity of light hair, and gentlemanly manners, the pleasantness of which was at times slightly marred by the faintest possible tinge of self-sufficiency. He was naturally both clever and agreeable, and perhaps he was a little too well aware of his possession of these desirable qualities. However, he placed a chair very politely for Netta, and another for Aimée, and seated himself exactly in front, where he could survey the new comer at his leisure. Netta fancied she could detect an ironical glance of comparison between her dress and Aimée's. But perhaps it was only fancy. Aimée read nothing in his face beyond admiration of her new friend, and as Dudley's opinion weighed much with her she was proportionately pleased. He certainly exerted himself with unusual assiduity to make himself agreeable, and not without success.

Conversation flowed easily and pleasantly both before and during dinner. When it was over scarcely five minutes elapsed, before Dudley joined the ladies in the drawing-room. He came up to Netta, with the abrupt inquiry—

"Are you fond of music, Miss Lyster?"

"Very. I wish Aimée would play to me," said Netta.

"Aimée has not made much progress in music yet," said Mrs. Marshall. "I think she will sing better than she will play."

"I am going to begin regular practice now," remarked Aimée. "Do you sing, Netta?"

Netta shook her head. "I have never learnt," she said.

"But you sing without learning?" said Dudley.

"Sometimes I have tried a simple ballad with mamma. I used to sing with her a good deal when I was a child. But I have never attempted anything beyond amusing the children, or sending them to sleep," she added, laughing.

"Will you try then to amuse us, Miss Lyster? I will do my best *not* to go to sleep."

"It will really be a great pleasure to us," Mrs. Marshall said persuasively. "We so seldom hear any singing. Aimée is going to have lessons from a Winterton master, for Miss Shelton cannot sing."

Dudley offered to lead Netta to the piano, but she held back, colouring a little. "Thank you, I do not play accompaniments," she said. "I generally have to sing while I am working. And our piano is always out of tune."

"Then will you sing without an accompaniment?" asked Mrs. Marshall, smiling. "We are not critical judges, Miss Lyster, so you need not be afraid."

Netta yielded, with the laughing assurance that she was almost certain to break down, but she managed better than she had expected. Her voice was uncultivated, but it was naturally both rich and powerful. She sang very quietly, with downcast eyes, and at first the notes were tremulous. But she gained courage as she proceeded, till the clear sweet sounds filled the room, absolutely entrancing her hearers. When she came to the end Aimée's eyes were glistening, and Dudley said breathlessly, "Go on, Miss Lyster. Don't stop."

Netta was quite at her ease now, and sang without more pressing,—a pretty warbling air this time. A

third was begged for,—then a fourth; but Mrs. Marshall interposed:—

"You must not be unmerciful, Dudley. Miss Lyster will be quite tired. My dear, how could you say you did not sing?"

"It is only natural singing, not cultivated," replied Netta.

"But it ought to be cultivated. Such a voice ought not to be thrown away," said Dudley impatiently, as he roused himself from the reverie into which he had apparently been thrown.

"I wish you could manage sometimes to come and practise with me," said Aimée wistfully. "I should so like it, Netta. We might learn duets together."

Mrs. Marshall glanced from one to the other.

"Not a bad idea, Aimée. Miss Lyster, we have been rather perplexed about Aimée's proposed singing lessons. Her throat is not strong, and we are afraid she could never sing for an hour at a time, without resting. I wonder if you would like to share her lessons with her."

Aimée seized one of Netta's hands. "Oh, it would be delightful. I never had a companion yet in my lessons. Netta, *do* say yes."

Netta hesitated and coloured. "You are very kind to think of such a thing," she said.

"If you see any difficulties, pray do not shrink from telling me so," said Mrs. Marshall pleasantly. "Do not be afraid of us, Miss Lyster."

"Thank you," Netta said smiling. "I should like it extremely, Mrs. Marshall. One difficulty would perhaps be the want of time. But the chief one, if I am to speak plainly, is that I could not ask my father,—the expense——" and she hesitated again.

"I do not think you quite understand me," said Mrs. Marshall quietly. "It is already settled that Aimée is to have the lessons. I only ask you to come and join in them as a *friend*, Miss Lyster."

Netta's bright glance was full of gratitude.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "I don't know how to thank you enough. There is nothing that I should enjoy so much, if only I can be spared from home."

"You must manage it in some way, Miss Lyster," said Dudley decidedly. "Such a voice *ought* to be cultivated,—for the benefit of society."

Netta smiled again at the contrast between his words and her own thoughts. "For the sake of her future pupils," would have been nearer the mark.

"Then we will leave it uncertain until we have consulted your parents," said Mrs. Marshall kindly. "We shall be delighted if you are able to come. Aimée has been longing to see something of you."

"You must come here to-morrow and tell us, Netta," observed Aimée. "I do *hope* you will be able to learn with me. We can practise together, and have duets. It will be so much nicer than learning all by myself."

CHAPTER VII.

"Her cheek was pale, and thinner than should be for one so young."—TENNYSON.

THE music-lessons took place as proposed. Mrs. Lyster would not hear of a refusal being sent, and Netta did not press it. On other days also she went to the Laurels, for the sake of practising. Miss Shelton, who had now returned from her holidays, became almost as fond of Netta as did Aimée. Before long

she proposed to give the two girls an hour of French together once a week,—then of German. Mrs. Marshall concurred heartily in all that went on, only too well pleased that her child should have found a friend, whom she could so thoroughly trust and approve of. Necessarily this occupied much of Netta's time, and at length there was scarcely an afternoon in the week that she did not spend at the Laurels, starting immediately after dinner, unless especially invited to the Marshalls' early luncheon, and returning home to tea. She had thought it right to make her new friends early aware of her motive in working so hard, and Mrs. Marshall had promised to bear her wish in mind, while poor Aimée rather mournfully said that she was afraid it was wrong, but she *could* not wish Netta to go away *very* soon, just as they were becoming so fond of one another.

Netta worked doubly hard at home, to make up for her frequent absence, but no efforts of hers could prevent a larger amount of mending and household occupations from being entailed upon her mother and Elsie. Elsie loved her too much to grudge her the relaxation, as she would have termed it, though in truth it was no rest to Netta, either mentally or physically, but still she could not at times entirely suppress a feeling of surprise. It seemed so unlike Netta's usually thoughtful unselfish ways, to leave home with such apparent willingness, when she could so ill be spared. She strove to suppress the feeling, but occasionally it imparted a slight sharpness to her tones, which Netta was not slow to perceive.

One evening, after working hard till past eleven o'clock, the girls had retired to their rooms. Elsie,

almost too weary to undress, was sitting by the low chest of drawers, resting her face on her hands, when some one touched her. She looked up with a start, to see Netta by her side.

"Poor child! how tired you are! Were you asleep, Elsie?"

"Oh no—I wish I were."

"Let me help you into bed, dear."

"No, you are as tired as I am. Did you come in for anything, Netta?"

"Only for a little talk, but we will leave it till another day. You are not fit to sit up any longer to-night."

"Yes, I am," returned Elsie, pushing the hair off her forehead. "My head aches too much for me to sleep, even if I go to bed, and I dare say a talk would do me good."

"No, I am afraid I have nothing very charming to say," replied Netta, and the sigh with which she spoke was so rarely heard from her that Elsie looked alarmed.

"Is it anything wrong, Netta—anything new?"

"It is only a plan that mamma and I have often talked over. I began to think it was time to mention it to you. But there is no hurry. Any day will do."

"I shall not close my eyes to-night till I have heard it," said Elsie. "Just feel how the pulses are all beating in my head, and it grows worse every minute, while I am thinking and wondering what you mean."

"You are overtasked, poor child," said Netta, as she took Elsie's chair, and made her sister sit down on the floor. "There rest your face here. Is that more comfortable? Don't you think we had better leave our little chat till to-morrow? It won't do your poor head

ny good. You ought to get into bed, and let me bathe it with cold water."

"No, your nice cool hands are the best," returned Elsie, shutting her eyes. "It is only that dreadfully close darning and patching which always make it ache so much. Now, Netta, please tell me what you were going to say."

Netta was silent for a minute, watching with a pained expression the pallid face that lay quietly on her dress, with the thick dark hair pushed back from the fine intellectual forehead, now throbbing visibly with excitement and fatigue, and the long dark lashes lying upon the white cheeks.

"I always feel so guilty, Elsie, when I see you look like this," she said at length. "I know my going so often to the Laurels throws much more work upon you. And yet I cannot think I am wrong to do it."

"It is nice for you to have the pleasure," murmured Elsie.

"That is not my reason for going, dear. If you have thought so, I must have seemed selfish indeed. But I have a very different reason."

"What?" asked Elsie rather anxiously, and Netta answered by another question.

"Elsie, have you thought much lately about our position—our difficulties?"

"Thought of them!" repeated Elsie. "There is little time to think of anything else."

"But I mean, have you looked forwards and backwards, and considered seriously what ought to be done? Things cannot go on quite like this much longer."

"They have gone on now for a good many years, I think."

"Yes, but they have grown worse every year. Until dear grandpapa's death we were never so badly off as we are now. We had at least *one* relation, who was glad to do all in his power to help us, though he was not rich. But now there is no one. If papa's difficulties were ever so great, he has not a single relation or friend in the world of whom he would feel justified in asking assistance. There is only uncle Falconer—and I should think he is the last person that would be likely to do anything for us. We really are not even certain whether he is still alive."

"I know," said Elsie. "Yes, I know things are bad. But I don't see why they should become worse."

"Only that every year the children are growing, and the clothes are wearing out, and there is no money to replace them. There are all the boys to settle out in life. And even now there are bills, which papa can at present see no prospect of being able to pay, though they are small."

"But why have you never said all this to me before?" asked Elsie, pressing her hands to her forehead. "Or what is the good of talking about it now? We can do nothing."

"I never told you before, dear, because mamma and I thought you had quite enough to try you, and it was not necessary. But now you must know it. Something must be done. And I am the eldest."

Elsie sat up suddenly, fixing her eyes in alarm on her sister's face. "Netta, what do you mean? What is your plan?"

"That I should go out as a governess, dear."

Elsie's head sank again on her sister's knee. She felt stunned, and incapable of thought. The room

seemed to turn round with her, while before her eyes flashed a vivid picture of home without Netta—the bright sunshiny face and helpful hands absent—the whole burden of work resting upon her mother and herself. Netta's sweet voice roused her from what was almost a trance of misery.

"Why, Elsie—Elsie, darling, I did not think it would trouble you so much. Surely you knew before that we had thought of such a thing."

"Oh, I don't know. I suppose I did—but I never dreamt it would be yet;" and one or two burning tears fell heavily. "What shall we do without you?" the poor girl added passionately.

"I would not think of going away if it were not absolutely necessary, dearest. But you see we must do all we can. We are too large a family for every one of us to stay at home. And this is why I have so gladly taken the opportunity of improving myself in singing and languages. Mrs. Marshall is very kindly looking out for me, and by the time I find a situation, I hope I shall be much better fitted for it than I should have been a little while ago. I am getting on rapidly, I know."

"You told Mrs. Marshall before me!" Elsie said half reproachfully.

"Only because I thought it was right. She might not have wished an embryo governess for Aimée's friend. But she was so kind about it. I would have talked to you sooner on the subject, Elsie, but I could not bear to trouble you. Come, darling, cheer up. You must not be downhearted about it."

"I can't help it. We have always been together,

except that one six months that you were at school. And then I was miserable."

"You will not be miserable now, Elsie. I know we shall feel the parting. I can hardly bear to think of it. But it is no worse than hundreds have to go through, who are less poor than ourselves." She paused a moment, passing her hand gently to and fro over Elsie's brow. Then bending over her, she whispered softly, "'The Eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.' We can never be really unhappy, dearest, with such words as those to rest upon. I often find them such a comfort."

The calmly uttered text fell with singular power upon Elsie's sensitive impressible mind. She still sat, with her face resting upon her sister's dress, but tears and agitation had left it. Except for the quivering of the closed eyelids she might almost have been deemed asleep.

"I can't bear the thought of leaving you all," Netta went on after a while. "I know how much it will throw upon you and mamma. But in another way I hope it will give you some relief. Think of the delight of sending home a five-pound note!"

"I would rather keep you at home than have all the five-pound notes in the world."

"Not for papa and mamma's sake, Elsie! We ought to do all we can to lighten their burden."

"Then I ought to go too."

"Oh no, both could not by any possibility be spared. Mamma would kill herself with overwork. And though I am not so clever as you, still I have had far greater advantages, and am much more fitted for a

governess' work than you are. Now, Elsie, I can't let you sit up any longer, or you will be ill."

"I can't sleep. I feel all in a whirl. Never mind me, Netta, but go to bed."

Netta would do nothing of the kind. She stayed in the room, quietly and expeditiously assisting her sister to undress. Elsie knelt to pray as usual, but the ground seemed reeling beneath her, and beyond a few disconnected petitions, she had no power to collect her thoughts. Netta hastened her into bed as soon as she rose, promising to read to her. She chose a very short psalm; then closing the Bible, came to the bedside, and laid a cold wet handkerchief on Elsie's hot brow.

"Oh, Netta, don't, it is so late," said Elsie, opening her eyes with a distressed look. "How tired you will be!"

"Not at all, dear. I often stay up as late as this, reading and studying, and I am only attending to you instead, for once. Mind you don't tell tales," she added playfully.

"It is not good for you," said Elsie with a sigh of relief, as another of those deliciously cool rags was laid on her head. "I don't wonder now that you have looked so thin lately."

"All imagination, Elsie, on your part. I am as well as possible. Hard work agrees with me, and so do short nights."

"I wish they did with me. But if I open a book when I come up to bed, the letters dance before my eyes, and my head aches as if it were wild. I have often tried, but it is of no use."

"You are not so strong as I am. I don't suppose

I could keep it up for any great length of time, but just now I am anxious to make the most of my opportunities. Now I won't allow you to say another word. You must go to sleep at once."

Elsie felt as if that would be impossible. Gradually, however, the soothing effect of the cold water, combined with her own excessive weariness, overcame the nervous excitement and pain, and she sank into unconsciousness. Netta waited till the regular breathing told of profound slumber, then rose, put away the water, extinguished the light, and went back to her own room.

Week after week passed by with monotonous regularity. October arrived, and Duncan returned to Oxford for his last term. Netta had by this time heard of more than one situation, through the kind exertions of Mrs. Marshall, but in each case she was decided to be far too young, and there was nothing for it but to wait patiently for better success.

Winter was creeping slowly on—always a time of trial and privation to the Lysters. Fires and lights had to be economised, warm dresses and blankets were few in number, and the want of good nourishing food was more severely felt than in summer. The children came down in the morning with blue chilblained hands, and shivering frames. Coughs and colds were frequent, and the little delicate Blanche especially seemed to fade and wither, like a frail flower, with the bitter winds that penetrated every crevice in the house, and whistled through the badly-made doors and windows.

November was a peculiarly damp chilly month that year. How Elsie used to dread leaving her bed in the

morning, and coming down into the parlour, where the fire had only just been lighted, and the room felt so cold and dreary! She was always vexed and ashamed to find her mother and Netta down before her, yet next day the struggle between duty and inclination was as hard as ever.

She came shivering into the sitting-room one morning to find them, as usual, already at work. Mrs. Lyster was arranging cups and plates, while Netta knelt before the grate, coaxing the feeble flame into a semblance of warmth. She looked round with a smile at her sister.

"Well, Elsie, did you ever see a more dreary November morning?"

"It makes one wish to stay in bed, and sleep till spring," said Elsie, turning from the window with a shudder. "Let me do that, mamma."

"No, you can cut the bread, dear. And then you had better dress Blanche."

"Myra was getting up when I came down," said Netta. "We are all late this morning. I overslept myself for once. Papa is in his study, I believe. Oh, here he is."

"I can't wait for breakfast this morning, Mildred," said Mr. Lyster entering. "Mr. Randall is at the door, and wants me to go at once to Alma Cottages. Poor Sterne has been taken worse, and has begged to see me, so Mr. Randall kindly drove round this way, to save me the walk, in case he should find me up and dressed."

"But you can't go without taking something, papa," said Netta eagerly. "The wind is bitterly cold, and you will be quite faint for want of food. Mamma, could we not ask Mr. Randall to come in for a minute?"

"He cannot spare the time," said Mr. Lyster. "I can easily wait till I return. The case is too urgent for delay."

"I wish the tea were made," remarked Mrs. Lyster. "Let me cut you one slice of bread and butter, Frederick."

"No, dear, I can't wait," he said, laying his hand on hers to check her. "Don't be anxious about me. I dare say I shall not be long gone."

He went out of the room as he spoke, and Mrs. Lyster turned to the fire to hide the tears which filled her eyes. The two girls followed him to the front door. A small chaise stood there, and within it sat Mr. Randall, the stout comfortable Elburton doctor, whose broad sturdy figure, loud hearty voice, and rolling laugh, were known to all the country round. Buttoned up to the chin, in the warmest of great-coats, he looked the picture of comfort, both externally and internally, despite the ungenial weather. A contrast indeed to the delicate-looking curate, shivering in his thin coat, pale and weary with a bad night and want of food. Mr. Randall himself was conscious of the difference.

"Hallo, Mr. Lyster, you look half-frozen already. It is a cold drive, I can tell you. There's danger of your being frozen out-and-out, if you don't wear something warmer than you have on now. Where's your overcoat?"

"I shall do very well," briefly responded Mr. Lyster stepping into the chaise.

"Humph! well, if you catch your death of cold, just remember that I have warned you, and you must take the consequences," said Mr. Randall in a manner that was intended to be witty, but it failed to elicit a smile from his companion, and the drive was for some dis-

tance a very silent one. The girls meanwhile returned to the parlour, Elsie saying in a half-choked voice—

"Mamma, it is bitterly cold, and papa's coat is *so* thin."

"I know it, dear," said Mrs. Lyster sadly. "Netta, will you cut off a good piece of bread, and put it aside in the cupboard—and the butter too. We must save it all for him, and eat our bread with dripping this morning. And I don't think I shall make any tea. We must not have it twice, and he will need a cup sorely when he comes in."

"There is less butter than usual, mamma," said Elsie.

"Yes, the price is rising so high that I am obliged to reduce the quantity. Blanche must have a little, or she will eat nothing, but I think we had better save the rest."

The girls acquiesced, as a matter of course. Then they ran upstairs to dress the children. Elsie, as usual, undertook Blanche. She loved the task, although it was no easy one, for on these cold dark mornings the child was languid and fretful, and often cried without a pause, from the time she left her bed to the time she went downstairs. Elsie performed the business of dressing her as expeditiously as possible, and then carried her down to the parlour, trying to win a smile by the way upon the little tearful face.

The fire was by this time burning up rather more brightly, though still a small one. Gerard was in the window, reading one of his lessons half aloud, and frowning with the effort to abstract his thoughts from the noise made by Myra and the twins. As soon as family prayers were over, chairs were drawn round the table, and breakfast was begun. Elsie ate little, from

distaste for the dry stale food, and Mrs. Lyster and Netta did the same, partly from a different reason, as they saw the rapidity with which the loaf diminished, under the attacks of the boys. Blanche sat shivering over her plate, too chilly and unwell to feel any appetite, and unconscious of the anxiety with which she was watched by her mother and sisters. Nugent alone remarked upon the absence of the usual small pat of butter.

"We are not going to have any this morning," said Netta gently, hoping her mother had not heard him. "There is only a little piece, and papa ought to have that when he comes home."

"But I say, Netta, why wasn't more got? It is rather too bad. There isn't a fellow I know that would put up with such fare. Dry bread, and milk-and-water! One might as well be beggars at once."

"Oh, Nugent, pray don't talk so," said Netta in a low pleading voice, with a glance to see if the words had reached Mrs. Lyster above the hum of voices. "We shall have some at tea, I dare say, but the price of things is so high now, that we are obliged to economize more than usual."

"It isn't too much that we have at the best of times," muttered Nugent discontentedly breaking his bread into little pieces. "I know I shouldn't like any one in the village to see our breakfast-table."

A wholesome diversion occurred at this moment in the arrival of a note from Aimée to Netta, left at the door by a servant. Netta read it in some surprise.

"My dearest Netta,—Mamma and I want very much to see you to-day, but as we both have colds,

and so cannot come to you, I must ask if you can manage to come to us. Mamma has had a letter this morning, which she wants to talk about to you. The truth is, aunt Fitzroy is just parting with her governess, and is looking out for another in a great hurry. Mamma told her some time ago of your wish, dear Netta, and she writes now to ask if we think this would be at all likely to suit you. Leila has quite set her heart upon it. I am afraid you would expect something better, for aunt Fitzroy only offers forty pounds a-year—but what she wants chiefly is some one just to take care of Leila, and be a companion to her, and overlook her English studies, and see that she prepares for her masters. I do not think it would be hard work, and I know aunt Fitzroy is kind. Leila might be troublesome to any one that she did not like, but *you* would not find her so. I can't bear even to propose this to you, dear Netta, but if you *must* leave home, I would rather you should go somewhere where I know you will be happy. Will you either write a line, or come and see me to-day? Aunt Fitzroy makes a direct offer, so you only have to say yes or no. The worst of it is that she says she cannot possibly wait more than two or three weeks at the utmost. She really must have some one to look after Leila and walk with her. I don't at all like the idea of your going away just before Christmas. But I must not write more.

"Believe me, ever your warmly-attached friend,

"AIMÉE MARSHALL."

Netta passed the note to her mother, with a quiet, "I think it will do." Elsie read it, and then hastily left the room. There was no time yet for any con-

sultation. Even when breakfast was over, much remained to be done. The elder boys were started off to school, the younger children set to work in various ways to learn their different lessons. Netta drew a long breath of relief when she found herself at length closeted in the study with her mother and Elsie.

No long discussion was needed. All felt, even Elsie, that it was not an offer to be lightly thrown aside. Ways and means, however, were necessarily taken into consideration. Netta's dress was no small difficulty. Anxious as she was to avoid expense, even she could not deny that several purchases would be absolutely necessary. She could not go about in Mrs. Fitzroy's house in print dresses, as she would do at home, through the winter. Something, too, for evening wear was indispensable. "If I have just enough to get through the first quarter," Netta remarked, "that is all I want. Afterwards I hope to be independent. Aimée may think forty pounds a small sum, but it will seem a fortune to me."

CHAPTER VIII.

"One by one thy duties wait thee,
Let thy whole strength go to each."
A. PROCTER.

"OH DEAR! Oh dear! When *will* Miss Lyster come? I'm so tired of waiting. I think trains are *always* behindhand."

Leila Fitzroy stood gazing disconsolately out of the window of a large West-End mansion. Mrs. Fitzroy was as usual seated in an easy-chair near the fire.

"Very often, my dear. But I have no doubt Miss Lyster will arrive before long."

"I'm sure I hope so. But she may have missed her train. Or there may have been an accident. Only think if there were!"

"Really, my dear, I see no reason to imagine anything of the kind."

"No, only it is possible. Oh, I hope you will like her as much as I do. But you must,—you can't help it when you see her. She is *so* nice."

"So it appears, from all accounts. I think a good deal of your aunt's opinion."

"And aunt Marshall is very fond of her, and so is Aimée, mamma. There's a railway cab! Oh no, it has gone by."

"She will come before long," repeated Mrs. Fitzroy. "I hope you will be a good pupil, Leila, and not allow me to repent having chosen so young a governess for you."

"Oh, I'll be as good as possible. But I shan't call her my governess, mamma. I shall call her my friend."

"Very well, my dear," placidly responded Mrs. Fitzroy. "Of course I shall take care that all our friends know what is her position."

"But why, mamma? Why mayn't she be my friend, and just teach me, without being called my governess? Why mayn't I call her Netta, as Aimée does?"

Mrs. Fitzroy laughed, and patted Leila's cheek.

"Because she *will* be your governess, whatever you call her. Remember, Leila, you will have to obey her. That is not exactly as you would do with a friend."

"I'll obey her as much as I did Miss Stone, at all events," said Leila tossing her head. "Perhaps more, because I shan't want to worry her. There comes another cab. And—yes, it is stopping here. Oh dear,

I do *hope* it is Miss Lyster. Mamma, don't you think it is? I must go and see. I want to be with her the moment she comes."

"Stay, Leila!" But Mrs. Fitzroy called in vain. Leila dashed down the broad staircase, and reached the front door just as Netta entered.

Cold and tired, sad and solitary, the poor girl felt at that moment, far from home and all who were dear to her, for the first time in her life entering alone and unprotected into the midst of strangers. The chill forlorn sensation at her heart had been deepening each moment of her long noisy bewildering drive through the streets of London. She could almost have thrown herself down, and cried like a child, with the longing for home that had assailed her. And scarcely anything would have been more welcome than the half shriek of delight, with which Leila rushed forward, and threw herself into her arms.

"Oh, I am so glad you have come! You can't imagine how glad. O dear! it will be so nice, so delicious, to have you all for my own. *Dear* Miss Lyster!" —here came a fresh hug—"you don't mind leaving home, do you? Won't Aimée be jealous of me? Almost as jealous as I have been of her. You dear creature!" Embrace number three, delivered rather spasmodically in her excitement. "What fun it will be, won't it? I shall call you my sister, Miss Lyster. You'll let me, won't you?"

Netta returned her caresses warmly, but she could not be quite oblivious of the presence of the footman, though his stolid unmoved countenance showed him to be pretty well accustomed to his young mistress's

eccentricities. She whispered, "Had I not better pay the cabman, dear, and see that my trunk is brought in?"

"Jones, look to Miss Lyster's luggage, and pay the man," said the young lady, turning to the footman with a rather imperious air. "Have it taken upstairs into Miss Lyster's room. Now, Miss Lyster, come to mamma. I'm longing for her to see you."

Amusement and pleasure at the unexpected style of her reception had imparted to Netta's face the colour and animation which it had wanted on her first arrival. They walked upstairs, Leila clinging tightly to her new friend's arm, and entered the spacious drawing-room. Mrs. Fitzroy rose slowly, adjusting her shawl, and looking rather curiously at this new paragon young governess, of whom she had heard so much, and from whom, to tell the truth, she expected so little.

But no disappointment was in store for her. She could not but be favourably impressed with Netta's refined and ladylike appearance. And if she would have preferred a slightly more stylish dress, and a rather less conspicuously pretty face, she could not be critical when her child was so delighted. Her words of greeting, and the pressure of her outstretched hand, if more quiet, were not much less warm than Leila's. Netta was immediately at her ease,—far less shy and lonely than she had expected to feel. She was made to sit on the sofa, close to the fire, while Mrs. Fitzroy chatted pleasantly, though languidly, about the weather, the news, the railway, and the city, and Leila sat on the rug at Netta's feet, devouring her with a pair of most unfaltering black eyes.

"My dear," Mrs. Fitzroy said at length, "Miss Lyster will think you quite rude if you stare like that."

"I like to look at Miss Lyster, mamma."

"You see I am giving you a spoilt child to take care of, Miss Lyster," said Mrs. Fitzroy, smiling. "She is sadly fond of having her own way."

"So is every one, I think," remarked Leila. "Miss Lyster, did you leave them all quite well at home?"

"Thank you,—pretty well. I saw Aimée this morning, and she sent a great many messages of love," Netta said, rather hurriedly. She did not feel as if she could trust herself to speak of home.

"You don't like coming away, do you?" said Leila, watching her intently. "But you must not mind it, Miss Lyster. You are going to be very happy here. I want you to feel quite at home. You don't mind coming, do you?"

"I cannot be glad to leave Ashgrove," said Netta gently.

"You are unreasonable, Leila," remarked Mrs. Fitzroy. "Of course, Miss Lyster is sorry to leave her home,—especially for the first time. But we will try to make her happy, and she must look forward to seeing Ashgrove again before long."

"Thank you,—I am sure I shall be happy," Netta said, with filling eyes, almost overcome by the word of sympathy. Mrs. Fitzroy was silent a moment, and then remarked,—

"I think you would like to take off your bonnet, Miss Lyster. Leila will be very glad to show you the way to your bed-room. Be sure, Leila, to see that Miss Lyster has everything she requires. And don't be troublesome, my dear."

Leila sprang readily to her feet, desiring nothing more than to have her governess to herself. She seized

Netta's hand, and drew her upstairs, with many affectionate demonstrations, and reiterated exclamations of delight.

It was a bright little room that they entered, the warm carpet and curtains seeming luxurious indeed to Netta, after the barely-furnished bed-rooms of home. A fire was burning in the grate, and the kind thoughtfulness of which it spoke was worth more to Netta than even the pleasant warmth imparted by the flames, which was certainly not to be despised under the circumstances. The window overlooked the street, and the incessant roll of carriages sounded strange to her country ears.

"Here's your trunk. Oh, that's right, Mary has opened it. Let me help you to unpack it, Miss Lyster. It will be much greater fun than calling Mary."

For a moment Netta rather shrank from displaying her scanty wardrobe,—scanty still, though replenished to the best of her parents' ability. But she conquered the feeling, and quietly consented. Leila seized on the first thing she could lay hold of, pulled it out, and placed it on a chair.

"There! is that right? I never unpacked in my life before. Oh, here's a muslin body! Don't you think it would be prettier if it were more trimmed?"

"Perhaps it would. But it does very well as it is."

"And here's a bonnet. I don't see your best one, though."

"I came here in my best," said Netta; and Leila rather opened her eyes, as she glanced at the plain and simply-trimmed though lady-like little bonnet that lay on the bed. Netta saw this, and smiled,—"You know

we are not rich," she said, "and we cannot afford such nice things as you wear."

"It is very *nice*, only it is dowdy," said Leila. "But you look very pretty in it, Miss Lyster. Have you any silk dresses?"

Netta shook her head. "Come, I cannot let you into all my wardrobe secrets," she said. "There is nothing worth seeing here, and I will unpack by and by, I think. Will you just tell me whether I ought to change my dress before tea?"

"Miss Stone did afterwards. You and I shall have tea in the school-room, and after papa and mamma have dined we shall go into the drawing-room for the rest of the evening,—unless you would rather stay alone. Miss Stone often did, and I was very glad. But you mustn't. I want you to be always with me. Sometimes when we are alone papa reads to us, but we often have people in. I'm sure I can't see what for. Do you like company, Miss Lyster?"

"I have had very little to do with it, dear, in the sense you mean."

"I wish I had, too. We're always having friends in to dinner or to tea, and I hate it. But come, Miss Lyster, if you don't want to unpack now, I'll show you our schoolroom."

It was roomy, and comfortably furnished. Lighted wax candles already stood on the table, for it was growing dark. Leila drew Netta to a large cupboard, remarking,—"There are all my lesson-books. I hated that cupcoard when Miss Stone was here, but I expect you will make me like it."

"I hope so," said Netta, extremely glad to find her

pupil in such a promising state of mind. "I think we shall enjoy our lessons together."

"To be sure we shall, you darling!" cried Leila rapturously. "Oh, don't I wish you were going to teach me everything instead of those stupid masters and mistresses? What do I want with Monsieur, and Madame, and all the rest of them?"

"Have you a German master?"

"French, and German, and music masters, and a French drawing mistress, and an English master for literature and all sorts of nonsense," said Leila. She began enumerating the number of hours in the week, in which she was engaged with them—adding,—"So you see you won't have so very much to do, Miss Lyster, except to keep me at work,—if you can,—and to walk out with me. Mamma said before you came that if you were young, one comfort was that you would have plenty of time for improving yourself. There! I oughtn't to have said that. But it is out now, so you needn't mind, and no harm is done."

Netta soon discovered that this was a very fair description of the life before her. To be a companion to Leila; to walk out with her; to prevent her from troubling Mrs. Fitzroy; to overlook her studies; to keep her at work "if she could;"—those three words expressed the great difficulty experienced by former governesses. But Netta had not often to contend with it. She found that she possessed a great and growing influence over her pupil. Spoilt child that Leila was, she had warm affections, and Netta had so completely won her heart that the young governess's slightest wish had marvellous power over the wilful child.

She was from the first treated with a kindness and